

THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF SRI AUROBINDO

By

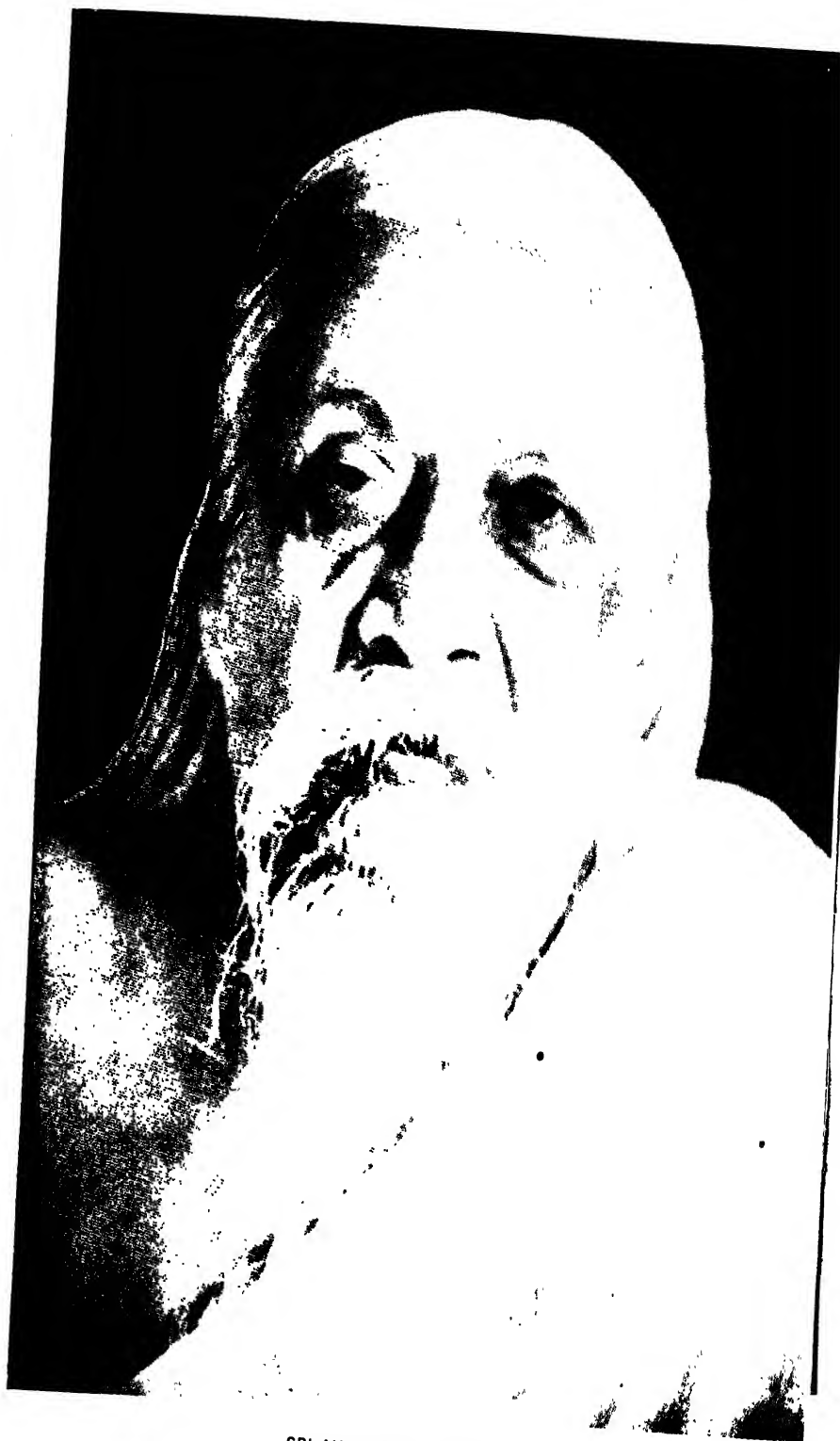
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SRI AUROBINDO (1872-1950)

Dedicated
to
THE MOTHER
who
has been the be-all and end-all
of my life and being and destiny
and
without whose Gracious help this book
could not have been written

—SHREE KRISHNA PRASAD

“The voice of poetry comes from a region above us, a plane of our being above and beyond our personal intelligence, a supermind which sees things in their innermost and largest truth by a spiritual identity and with a lustrous effulgency and rapture and its native language is a revelatory, inspired, intuitive word limpid or subtly vibrant or densely packed with the glory of this ecstasy and lustre.”

—Sri Aurobindo : *The Future Poetry*, pp. 392-93

“From time to time, every hundred years or so, it is desirable that some critic shall appear to review the past of our literature, and set the poets and the poems in a new order. The majority of critics can be expected only to parrot the opinions of the last master of criticism; among more independent minds a period of destruction, of preposterous over-estimation, and of successive fashions takes place, until a new authority comes to introduce some order.”

—T. S. Eliot : *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, pp. 108-9

ABBREVIATIONS

F P — *The Future Poetry*

L3 — *Letters of Sri Aurobindo, Third Series*

L.L.Y. — *Life, Literature, Yoga*

The Bulletin— *The Bulletin of Physical Education*, now renamed
*The Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International
Centre of Education*

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PREFATORY NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The present book embodies the thesis on Sri Aurobindo's literary criticism, which I had submitted to Patna University, Patna some years ago for the D.LITT. degree. After I was awarded the said degree I thought that the Patna University would either itself publish it in a book-form or financially help me through some suitable subsidy to get it published. I waited for the decision of the Patna University on this matter for quite a number of years. It was only when I got convinced that the Patna University authorities were not at all interested in such academic ventures that I decided to approach some good local publishers for the purpose. Fortunately for me, Sri Mohit Mohan Bose, proprietor of Bharati Bhavan, Patna, who had come to me some months back for some work of his own, agreed to publish the thesis in its entirety. I am, therefore, grateful to him for this offer and wish that there were other publishers in this country who were equally generous to the research-minded teachers, particularly in English language and literature.

Of the many-sided creative genius of Sri Aurobindo I have chosen to write here on an aspect of his literary achievement, which has not yet received sufficient notice. It is the aspect of literary criticism. I consider it as significant an aspect of his creative genius as his Yoga or philosophy or poetry. In this belief I propose to draw here an outline of his poetics as it is to be found in his two principal books of literary criticism, namely *The Future Poetry* and *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Third Series. In this connection I shall be concerned chiefly with the work of presentation and exposition of his general theoretical views about the art of poetry and of his leading arguments about the shape and substance of the poetry of the future he has clearly seen in his luminous vision. I do not find myself equal to the task of assessing or passing any judgment upon his critical achievement, but it is difficult, in a work of this kind, to avoid it altogether. As such, in the concluding chapter of this thesis, I have made it a point to indicate, as best as I could, his contribution as a literary critic against the general background of modern English criticism. At the same time, it has been, more or less, my constant endeavour to discover, as far as possible, the

affiliations of Sri Aurobindo's poetics with, or, at times, points of departure from, what obtains in the general critical traditions of the East and the West. Sri Aurobindo's general approach to any problem is essentially synthetic and harmonising and such an endeavour on my part, therefore, fits in with his own taste and temper. Moreover, this imparts in no mean manner an unmistakable "critical" bias to the method of presentation and exposition of Sri Aurobindo's views, which I have mostly adopted here. And then, I have tried to present his literary criticism mostly in his own language. Quotations from his several writings, literary as well as non-literary are, therefore, fairly numerous. My only excuses are, firstly, that this will enable the readers of this thesis to know Sri Aurobindo as a literary critic at first hand, to a fairly large extent, and, secondly, that I found this to be the best way of presenting his poetics in as living and forceful a manner as one could. There is, indeed, such a living power and beauty and music and majesty in his large epical style, whatever the theme and occasion of writing, that one's keen sensitiveness to it obliges one to reproduce it in the original with all its incomparable opulence and controlled energy. Also, this, as I should like to believe, has indirectly given some additional weight and force to my own enthusiasm for the work as well as the style of my own convictions, wherever found.

It will not be difficult, I hope, to see that there is an underlying unity of idea here which binds the various chapters of my thesis closely together. The all-important point which I seek to establish through my study of Sri Aurobindo's literary criticism is what is contained in what I consider to be a very significant critical pronouncement of our so-called soulless age by Sri Aurobindo : "the true creator, the true hearer is the soul". The great Victorian critic, Matthew Arnold, had similarly declared in the nineteenth century that "genuine poetry is conceived and composed in the soul". But then he simply made the statement and left it at that, nor, I am afraid, did he himself have a quite clear as well as full knowledge of either the implications of the statement he made or what is known as 'the soul'. This modest work of mine has been, in a sense, designed to elucidate and expand the meaning of the Aurobindonian or Arnoldian critical creed, as embodied here.

Chapters like the sixth, tenth, eleventh, and the twelfth are mostly summaries of some of the chapters of *The Future*

Poetry. The exposition, however, is sufficiently detailed so as to enable the reader, first of all, to get as clear and comprehensive a picture of the theoretical archetypal pattern of the art of poetry which has been behind its creation through the ages but which is rediscovered and reinterpreted afresh by Sri Aurobindo for our correct grasp of the undying underlying fundamentals of the genuine poetic activity as well as for the wholesome guidance of its prospective practitioners. Secondly, it is justifiably implied that the distinctive national characteristics of English poetry have much to do with the peculiar nature of its evolution through the centuries from the time of Chaucer onwards. Curiously enough, the general course of English poetry coincides, more or less, with the general course of the evolution of mankind itself; and this facilitates the task of Sri Aurobindo while indicating the precise form and substance of the future poetry of man which is bound to grow in perfect consonance with the spiritual transformation of the general level of his consciousness. Such an unmistakable indication of the future poetry of man is essential to Sri Aurobindo's intentions and objectives as a literary critic. Hence the necessity to describe it as fully as possible. After all, it is, in a sense, but for this purpose that Sri Aurobindo undertook to play the rôle of a literary critic. His poetics is, therefore, but a prelude—a very necessary prelude, though to the delineation of this picture of the future poetic activity of man with all the clarity and serenity of an assured spiritual vision. Still, we must not think that it is like a prophet, as we usually understand him, that Sri Aurobindo writes out his literary criticism. He is more modest in his utterance or prediction and more easily open to other, even contrary, points of view. Yet who can miss the ring of confidence in his prophetic critical voice and the sureness of seeing with which he unfolds before us in all possible detail the picture of man's future poetry? But then he lays down the indispensable conditions, too, which must be fulfilled before the vision can be concretely and progressively realised. That there is such a magnificent and spiritually uplifting vision in store for modern man, calculated to transform the very cultural level of his living and ethos of the civilisation so far built up by him, is, however, unmistakable, and made superbly clear by him in these as well as the concluding chapters of *The Future Poetry*.

A word of apology is probably necessary for the second chapter of this book. Strictly speaking, it may not be

quite germane to the work undertaken here. But I have the feeling that since Sri Aurobindo writes, whatever the subject in hand, nearly with the impact of his full—which, really means in his case, a many-sided and well-integrated—personality, it is necessary for us, too, to keep our hold on the various rôles he visibly played in his fairly long span of life as well as the many different forms and disciplines of expression through the words he chose for the communication of his ever-growing, ever-opulent, ever-illuminating visions and experiences. This is why I thought it best to draw at least an outline, though necessarily brief in the circumstances, of his actual life and of, at least, his significant and outstanding writings both in prose and poetry. Such an outline will enable the reader to approach his work of literary criticism, which I have isolated and concentrated upon in these pages, in the proper perspective and appropriate biographical as well as literary and non-literary context. It will also be felt, I hope, by the discerning reader that no aspect of Sri Aurobindo's achievement, whether literary or non-literary, can be completely isolated from the rest of his contributions, for each is of a piece with the whole. In any case, this chapter is designed to provide the necessary biographical and general literary background of Sri Aurobindo, against which the study of his literary criticism, as undertaken here, is likely to become, I believe, more profitable as well as interesting and also fuller.

For all that I have been able to perform and should I also add achieve? here, I am entirely indebted to Sri Aurobindo himself. My first acknowledgment of boundless gratitude is, therefore, to him, and also, of course, to his life-long collaboratrix, Madame M. Alfasa or the Mother, as she is popularly looked upon all over the world that knows her. The intimate, gracious presence of both of them, though physically far away, has been always there to encourage, inspire and guide me all through this difficult endeavour of mine, and, above all, to put fresh spirit in me whenever I felt low and depressed. For all the pain of labour which I had to pass through to accomplish this task, it was their subtle compassionate presence within me which readily filled me, by way of compensation, as it were, with a kind of deep creative joy which alone stimulated, invigorated and sustained me all along.

Still, I must confess, I approached Sri Aurobindo's literary criticism with (to quote Kierkegaard) "fear and trembling". His icy heights were not intended for men

like me. However, as the years passed and I got acclimatised to the rarefied atmosphere, a modicum of fruitful endeavour on my part became possible. In the last analysis, a mountain has to allow itself to come to terms with a mountaineer. Otherwise, it could not be climbed at all !

For much of the material used in my second chapter I have freely drawn upon Dr. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar's two biographical-critical works on Sri Aurobindo, and feel deeply indebted to him on this account.

Last but not the least, my grateful thanks are due to Sri Nolini Kanta Gupta, Sri K. D. Sethna and the late Sri Rishabhchand of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry; to Prof. V. K. Gokak, ex-Director of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Simla; Dr. George Jacob, ex-Vice-Chancellor, Patna University; Sri K. Ahmad, ex-Director of Public Instruction, Government of Bihar; Dr. R. K. Sinha, Head of the Department of English, Patna University and Dr. K. P. Ambastha, Prof. of English, Patna University, all of whom helped me with their valuable suggestions whenever I referred to them for guidance. I feel particularly grateful to Sri K. D. Sethna of the Ashram, who went through several of my chapters with minute care and helped me improve upon their first drafts.

■ ■ ■

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

It is now over two decades that Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) gave up his body. But he is still too near us to foster the kind and amount of objectivity and large detached perspective in which alone a person, particularly of his attainments and stature, is properly and fully understood and appreciated. And yet in certain matters he attained not only immediate name and fame but almost the position of a great classic, comparable with that of the rare outstanding thinkers and writers of ancient times. As soon as *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga* came out, he came to be recognised as a Master Yogi of the status and calibre of no less celebrated a figure of ancient times than Pātanjali, and a profound philosopher like Shankarāchārya. Indeed, as his philosophic position was one of sturdy challenge to the long-accepted philosophy of Shankarāchārya, Sri Aurobindo came to be hailed, at least in the circle of his admirers, as an even greater philosophic figure than Shankarāchārya himself. He himself, however, would deprecate such an attitude on the part of the reader and critic. Though, no doubt, he firmly and thoroughly refuted and even demolished the philosophies of both Buddha and Shankarāchārya, he, yet, would not like anybody to think of him as a greater philosopher than the latter. As a matter of fact, in his own vast cosmic philosophic scheme he has given every philosophical thought or system its appropriate place of honour. Indeed, if we believe in the evolutionary march forward of life and consciousness, as Sri Aurobindo did with the clarity and thoroughness of conviction, we cannot help recognising and appreciating the truth and validity of each life-movement or thought-formulation at its own appropriate place and time. And Sri Aurobindo's outlook or vision, whether Yogic or philosophic, was global, cosmic, supra-material from the first, and, therefore, naturally vastly catholic and all-embracing. All the great and famous religions of the world have their place in his supramental Yogic-philosophic system. It is wrong, therefore, to confine him to any single line of thought, or to raise questions of his superiority or inferiority to others. Nevertheless,

as time passes, his Yogic philosophy is sure to be studied from many and various points of view. Already a number of good books on the subject have come out. It is hoped that, as our understanding of him grows fuller and wider, we shall appreciate the meaning and message of his supramental yoga and philosophy more and more. Nor will the epoch-making newer and still newer scientific discoveries and researches dim or threaten his yogic-philosophic position. On the contrary, these will further confirm his vision and experience and raise his status as a Yogi and philosopher. He was a true seer, a mighty Rishi in modern times, who could not only fruitfully harmonise the astounding findings of modern science with those of ancient spiritual scriptures but clearly and radiantly visualise as well as inwardly and outwardly live the future ages of the supermind in which science and spirituality, matter and spirit, will mutually reinforce and enrich each other in the new integral experience and knowledge of man and, thereby, give a completely new direction to human civilisation and culture so as to fulfil with ease and naturalness the age-long dream of heavenly perfection upon earth.

Yet the irony of it all is that being never an academic student of either Yoga or philosophy, he did not personally look upon himself either as a Yogi or a philosopher. It is the world which, he said, had thrust these titles and honours upon him.

Sri Aurobindo looked upon himself primarily as a poet and a politician. Poetry he read, loved, practised and cultivated from his very early teens, and all through the fairly long span of seventy-eight years of his life he kept on reading and writing poetry. It is, indeed, wonderful to recall that in a manner surpassing even the most painstaking of poets, Goethe, he had started writing his poetical *magnum opus*, *Savitri: a Legend and a Symbol* during his Baroda days; i.e., the very early years of this century and he kept on working at it until his death in 1950, and this, in spite of the fact that he evoked and depended upon a fresh wave of inspiration each time that he apparently laboured at it. And as to his interest in politics, so long as he was actively immersed in it, prior to his going to Pondicherry in 1910, it was veritably the very breath and passion of his life and thought. But it may strike as surprising to many to learn that even after his so-called retirement from active politics in 1910, his interest in politics never waned for a moment, though

he completely changed his method and object of work. For the emancipation of India he kept on working day and night in the private laboratory of his yogic discipline and that is why, when her political independence formally came in 1947 on the 15th August, his own birthday, he did not look upon it as a fortuitous accident but as the sanction and seal of the Divine upon his life-long work and aspiration. But then, in the course of his pre-Pondicherry political life itself he had received a vision which was greater than that of the mere political independence of India which, in his yogic vision, a few years later, he had already seen as accomplished. And on his coming to Pondicherry, as he began to make rapid progress in his spiritual *sadhana*, or practice, this greater vision began to expand and enlarge and deepen itself not only in shape and size but in import and implication to such an extent that it did not take him long to look upon the political freedom of India as merely a prelude to her greater cultural and spiritual emancipation and all this, too, not merely for her own sake but for that of other nations as well, nay, the whole of humanity. And ultimately the scope of the vision covered the very planet earth which is certainly greater than the humanity that inhabits it. His Supramental Yoga was, therefore, being practised by him till the very end of his physical life, not for himself, not for his community or country alone, not even for the whole of mankind but for the entire earth. He has dared through his Yoga to change radically the very conditions and principles of living upon earth so that it can truly and actually turn into the home of the Divine, the Paradise, long dreamt of by enlightened souls all the world over, the home of Immortality and Divine Light and Delight.

Anyway, we will fail to appreciate him properly if we forget this wider and deeper aspect of his political *sadhana* which he never stopped and for which he gave his all to us, including his physical life. And poetry, too, was no mere literary exercise or elevated pastime to him by which he could enjoy some relief of relaxed hours from the rigours and intensities of his yogic life. No, it was also a means of his yogic *sadhana*, his spirituality itself. Both poetry and politics which were the two great passions of his life he constantly pressed into the higher service of humanity and the still wider service of the earth. He used both of them as some of the integral means for accomplishing the work of wholesale liberation

and deliverance to which he addressed himself till the end with all the determination of his powerful, one-pointed will and the growing resources of his spiritual personality.

An awareness of this truth in course of time will lead to better and deeper studies of both his poetry and politics, than is the case at present.

But Yoga and philosophy, poetry and politics, however large was his share or interest in each one of them, and however intensively and extensively he poured himself forth into them with singular devotion, courage and self-immolation, do not exhaust his creative genius. His interest in education, both practical and theoretical, has a whole radical, psychological philosophy behind it. His new interpretation of the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita has already unleashed a fresh and profound study of our ancient Scriptures. The Aurobindonian interpretation of the Vedic and Upanishadic symbolism is a bold and magnificent challenge to the West-dominated Vedic and Upanishadic scholarship followed in this country in modern times. At the same time, it provides a firm and true foundation for picking up and erecting once again the massive structure of ancient Indian spiritual wisdom and knowledge which alone can not only inspire us to new national life and thought of an enduring nature, so urgently needed today, but effectively meet the swelling and threatening challenge of modern, Western scientific, positivistic thought and philosophy and mode of living. The ensnaringly dangerous assault of the ideology of Communist materialism upon life and thought today can also be successfully met by this very ancient power of Vedantic spirituality. Indeed, it is not merely India but the very humanity of both today and tomorrow that stands in need of such a life-giving and mind-growing and spirit-fulfilling knowledge, lodged and locked in our ancient Scriptures. In this connection, Sri Aurobindo's study of Indian culture and literature and of Valmiki, Vyasa, Kalidasa, Bankim, Tilak, Dayanand, Tagore etc., who are, by common consent, some of the outstanding representative figures, even pillars, one may say, of our ancient and modern literary-spiritual heritage, has in it the deep potentiality of releasing numerous fresh research work on these great Indian writers and the general subject of Indian culture itself. Again, the grand synthetic vision of the general human cycle and the inevitable fact of human unity and international

peace and brotherhood in that glorious vision which he has unfolded before us through two of his major works, *The Human Cycle* and *The Ideal of Human Unity*, can provide the nucleus for the setting up of a quite new Department of International Relations in every enlightened university worth the name.

For myself, I have chosen, as stated in the Preface, to work on that aspect of Sri Aurobindo's literary genius which shows him as a literary critic. Though this aspect has not yet received the notice it deserves, either in the Aurobindonian circle or in the larger world, here, too, his contributions, in my view, are of a large, universal and eternal significance and matter as much to the readers and practitioners of poetry and art and literature in the West as those in the East. Here, too, his approach is essentially Yogic-philosophic, and his aim is to discover a magnificent synthesis of the general literary and critical traditions obtaining in the East and those in the West from the very ancient times to the present. Above all, the foundational basis of his poetic theory is as eternally strong and alive, as central to our very life and culture as the soul itself. The structure of his literary criticism, is, thus, rooted deep enough in eternal human nature and aspiration no less than the eternal divine Reality to which our ancient Indian wisdom has traced everything in us and in the general creation around us. Its various mansions cover all the important aspects and forms of poetical art and are the product of creative materials and genius, drawn both from the East and the West, the past and the present, 'tradition' and 'individual talent', and the building, as a whole, has a meaning and message for all of us, whether we write in English or any other language, whether we are traditionalists or progressives, whether we draw our inspiration from the past or the present, or, what is still more exciting, the future. Sri Aurobindo's use of the past and the present, whether he is dealing with philosophy or Yoga or history or politics or culture or poetry or criticism or any particular author or literary work, is invariably done with a view to giving us an insight into and foresight of the future. In literary criticism, too, therefore, when he deals with poetry, his eye is constantly turned towards its future form and growth. In this connection, it certainly speaks of his personal as well as impersonal Yogic integrity that for all his ardent Indian nationalism and conscious learned love of nearly all the major Indian languages and litera-

tures, he, under the guiding inspiration of his large, universal spiritual vision of the future, transcending the pressures of nationality, race and language, gives the pride of place to the English language and English poetry. It is the latter which, in his view, are destined to fulfil the vision of the future. This may be one of the reasons why he chose to write always in English and not in any other language though being a polyglot he had mastery over several languages, Indian as well as European, and he could have expressed himself equally effectively in any other language. And this again is the reason why he likes to stress the need, on the part of the British and other English-speaking races, for developing a more catholic, emancipated and international outlook upon English than is the case at present, so that their creative writers at least keep themselves open to the new cultural and spiritual influences which have already started effectively infiltrating from the East into the West. If the doors of the English language and literature can be truly kept open for assimilating these Eastern influences and, above all, the new spiritual truths which, without being chauvinistically tied to this or that country, this or that religion or creed or race, are now pouring down upon the earth with the determined aim of transforming the very earthly consciousness and its expression, both literary and non-literary, English eminently bids fair to fulfil the destiny which Sri Aurobindo has seen of it, in his free, large spiritual vision. In *The Future Poetry* which is his principal work of literary criticism, he, therefore, makes it an important part of his thesis to indicate and stress the indispensable conditions which are necessary for realising this glorious future of English poetry. And here it is, interestingly enough, that he takes us back to the very ancient times as well, particularly as they obtained in our country, for he tells us without any shadow of a doubt that the true destiny of the future poetry, in whatever language, can be fulfilled only when it tries to approximate more and more to what our ancient poets and seers called the *mantra*. The higher and the very highest uses as well as destinies of poetry can be achieved only when the poet develops a truly intuitive, psychic, illuminative, in brief, spiritual consciousness and vision. It is now to be seen whether the European poets are ready to welcome and assimilate this apparently Eastern or Indian poetical utterance of the sublime kind and accent to their own

poetic consciousness and expression. If they would fail to see this large sign on the wall and, consequently, fail to respond to the new demands of the evolutionary spirit of the new psychic being, they would be left behind and the races and languages which would be willing and ready to follow this new voice of the poetical Muse would be the true pioneers of the new creative venture in the rich, endless regions of the Spirit.

But the theme which recurs in Sri Aurobindo's literary criticism with an unmistakable insistence is that poetry is essentially an activity and expression of the soul. I have devoted a whole chapter to the elucidation of what he meant when he said that "the true creator, the true hearer is the soul". For the present, I like to recollect and glance at a similar statement made by the great Victorian literary critic, Matthew Arnold, in course of his essay on Thomas Gray. Passing his neo-romantic judgment upon the poetry of Dryden and Pope, Arnold said :

"The difference between genuine poetry and the poetry of Dryden, Pope and all their school, is briefly this: their poetry is conceived and composed in their wits, genuine poetry is conceived and composed in the soul. The difference between the two kinds of poetry is immense."¹

I do not think it caused any sensation at the time it was written, unlike the dust of excitement and controversy which got raised in France in the early 'thirties of this century when Abbé Henri Bremond came out with his thesis equating the poetic with the mystical experience in his lecture delivered before the French Academy on *Priere et Poesie*. Nor, for aught I know, has it raised since then even a mild type of serious discussion in the literary or academic circles of England. When T.S. Eliot in course of his lectures on the use of poetry and the use of criticism at Harvard University during the winter of 1932-33, thought it necessary to refer to this remark of Arnold, the kind of criticism which his sensitive and sharp intelligent mind could put forth was but this :

"What had a man whose youth was so rigorously seized and purged at Rubgy, to do with an abstract entity like the Soul ? 'The difference between the two kinds of poetry is immense.' But there are not two kinds of poetry, but many kinds; and the difference here is no more immense

1. *Essays in Criticism*, Second Series, Macmillan & Co., 1935 p. 68.

than that between the kind of Shakespeare and the kind of Arnold. There is petulance in such a judgment, arrogance and excess of heat. It was justifiable for Coleridge and Wordsworth and Keats to depreciate Dryden and Pope, in the ardour of the changes which they were busy about; but Arnold was engaged in no revolution, and his shortsightedness can only be excused."¹

By now we appear to have so contentedly and fully accepted Eliot's condemnation of Arnold's tentative attempt in the remark quoted above to trace the genuine poetry to the activity of the soul in man that we do not even think it necessary to question and scrutinise Eliot's judgment and thereby re-examine afresh whether Arnold had something truly 'revolutionary' or even profound or remarkable to say about poetry. For us Eliot's pronouncement seems to be more weighty, authoritative and easily acceptable than Arnold's. It is almost final on the subject. And the result has been that no serious re-examination of this general remark of Arnold, that genuine poetry is conceived and composed in the soul, has been hitherto made in English literary criticism, although well-known critics like Middleton Murry and Herbert Read, for example, have clearly expressed themselves in our times, as Shelley, Emerson, Whitman etc. did in the last century, in favour of the soul-aspect or soul-stress in the inspiration and creation of poetry and art.

It is, no doubt, true that Arnold neither defined the term 'soul' which he used with such impeccable confidence in his demeanour nor probably looked upon 'the soul' of man inspiring his poetic activity and expression in such ecstatic and sublime terms as Shelley, Emerson, Abbé Bremond and Charles Morgan do. It may be even doubtful whether with all his religious fervour and faith he had a 'genuine' experience or realisation of 'the soul' himself. But T.S. Eliot, too, for all his zealous religious leaning and advocacy, hardly gives a better account of himself in this regard than Arnold. If 'the soul' appears to him to be no better or higher than 'an abstract entity', it is clear that he has not really experienced it. Nor do we feel much enlightened when he tries to point out to us that there are not only two but many kinds of poetry. Indeed, if one is sufficiently catholic in one's taste, one may concede that there are as many

1. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Faber & Faber, MCMXLVI, pp. 117-118.

kinds of poetry as there are poets living and writing. But this certainly does not throw any light upon the main issue raised by Arnold, which is: whether there is not a marked difference between the poetry of wit and intellect, of "ingenuities" and "personifications" which Dryden and Pope, for example, wrote, and the poetry of the soul which is the only kind of poetry worth having; for the poetry which is written purely under the pressure of one's intellect and wit is too superficial and ingenious to touch our inner being and is, therefore, false poetry. In the paragraph where this notable remark of Arnold occurs, he elucidates this difference fairly well. He continues:

"The difference between the two kinds of poetry is immense.

They differ profoundly in their modes of language, they differ profoundly in their modes of evolution. The poetic language of our eighteenth century in general is the language of men composing *without their eye on the object*, as Wordsworth excellently said of Dryden; language merely recalling the object, as the common language of prose does, and the dressing it out with a certain smartness and brilliancy for the fancy and understanding. This is called "splendid diction". The evolution of the poetry of our eighteenth century is likewise intellectual; it proceeds by ratiocination, antithesis, ingenious turns and conceits. This poetry is often eloquent, and always, in the hands of such masters as Dryden and Pope, clever; but it does not take us much below the surface of things, it does not give us the emotion of seeing things in their truth and beauty. The language of genuine poetry, on the other hand, is the language of one composing with his eye on the object; its evolution is that of a thing which has been plunged in the poet's soul until it comes forth naturally and necessarily. This sort of evolution is infinitely simpler than the other, and infinitely more satisfying; the same things true of the genuine poetic language likewise. But they are, both of them, also infinitely harder of attainment; they come only from those who, as Emerson says, "live from a great depth of being".¹

We see that the difference, the contrast between what Arnold calls the false and artificial poetry and the true and genuine or natural poetry, is given in as lucid and convincing a language as possible. There does not seem to be any confusion or contradiction in his own mind about this difference. And the reference to

1. Arnold : op. cit., pp. 68-69.

Emerson is significant. It indicates that without exactly defining what he means by the soul he eminently succeeds in making his point clear that genuine poetry or poetry of the soul can come only from those who "live from a great depth of being", who have truly felt "the emotion of seeing things in their truth and beauty". That is to say, his conception of the soul is not something superficial or unreal or even vague. It has the validity and power of a true understanding and experience of how a man of the soul really feels and sees and lives. He may not ostensibly raise this understanding and experience to the mystical, divine level, as some others do. But the fact that his experience of the soul, as stated here, is not of such a nature as to be called only "an abstract entity", as Eliot imputes, is really unmistakable. It is in its own way a living and uplifting experience, and, therefore, a real, genuine experience of the soul, as any mystic or spiritual poet and critic can testify.

Nor does this distinction between the false poetry of wit and ratiocination, on the one hand, and the genuine poetry of the soul, on the other, suggest that Arnold thinks that there can be only these two kinds of poetry and no other. One feels rather that by bringing in this aspect of the matter here, Eliot is only sidetracking the main issue raised by Arnold. He is, in fact, dismissing the truth and cogency of Arnold's chief argument by pushing it from our view. The question here is not whether there are only two or many kinds of poetry but whether or no there is what may be called false poetry which, however clever and brilliant in itself, is to be clearly distinguished from what may be taken as genuine poetry. At any rate, by his lucid, assured argument Arnold proves the basic distinction between these two kinds of poetry.

What is more, we do not feel any "petulance" or "arrogance and excess of heat" in such a judgment, as Eliot alleges. On the contrary, the remark is made in such a sober and truth-inspired tone and language that we do not even feel the heat of any argument or discussion being carried on here. His dislike of Dryden and Pope is neither arrogant nor contemptuous. As a matter of fact, there is even an undercurrent of appreciation of the things which they could easily do with a sovereign mastery. Only he has also the insight and discernment to discover where they are most wanting, and the boldness to say so in as precise and strongly

clear a language as a courageous and confident critic can do. If the truth were to be told, it is unfortunately T. S. Eliot himself who, because he does not like the clear and positive attitude of Arnold towards Dryden and Pope, whom he himself admires, and probably does not think much, at least consciously, of the poetry of the soul, which, in spite of his religiosity, he looks upon as some "abstract entity" only,—it is Eliot rather than Arnold who betrays something of the "petulance... arrogance and excess of heat" in such a judgment.

However, I am not concerned here with the conflict of opinion between Arnold and Eliot upon the question of genuine poetry. I only like to emphasise that like Arnold, Sri Aurobindo also feels that genuine poetry is an experience and expression of the soul. Though a modern writer, and also one whose eye is constantly directed towards the future the future of poetry and art no less than the future of man's civilisation—Sri Aurobindo's literary tastes and sympathies may be, in a sense, taken to be formed by those values and perceptions which neo-romantics like Arnold and Ruskin and Carlyle admired and cherished. He, too, was a neo-Romantic like these great Victorians, and he, too, believed in the reality of the soul and considered all true artistic or poetic creation as the 'natural and necessary' outflow of the soul-vision of the inspired seer-artist. Indeed, being a great mystic and master-Yogi and spiritual philosopher and guide, he could easily confirm the unshakable validity of the spiritual truth underlying the literary or artistic values and perceptions, cherished and advocated by these neo-Romantic Victorians. Just as he discovered and realised that it is his soul, and not his mind, senses, or body which is at the centre of man's being and action, inspiring and informing all his thoughts, feelings and deeds, whether directly or indirectly, and that it is through the conscious awakening of the soul within him that he can truly understand not only the reality of his true being but his intimate and deep kinship with the supreme divine Reality above, around and within him, so he naturally came to see that "it is the spirit within and not the mind without that is the fount of poetry"¹, that "the true creator, the true hearer is the soul"². He also discovered that the peculiar

1. Sri Aurobindo: *The Future Poetry*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1953, p. 274.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

“intensity which is the stamp of poetical speech and of the poetical movement . . . comes from the stress of the soul-vision behind the word”.¹ And as to “that which we call genius”, says Sri Aurobindo, “it comes out from something deep within which calls down the word, the vision, the light and power from a level above the normal mind”.² Similarly, the rapture of creation, “the enthusiasm of illumination and inspiration” which an artist feels, is really made up of “the sense of the inrush from above”.³ Indeed, as he delightfully puts it, “That source, when we know better the secrets of our being, turns out to be the spiritual self with the diviner consciousness and knowledge, happier fountains of power, inalienable delight of existence.”⁴ And if sight is taken, as it is done by Sri Aurobindo, to be “the essential poetic gift”, “the archetypal poet in a world of original ideas”, is, according to him, “a Soul that sees in itself intimately this world and all the others and God and Nature and the life of beings and sets flowing from its centre a surge of creative rhythm and word-images which become the expressive body of the vision; and the great poets are those who repeat in some measure this ideal of creation, *kavayah satya śrutah*, seers and hearers of the poetic truth and poetic word”⁵. No wonder, therefore, if the poetic vision of life is regarded by him as “not a critical or intellectual or philosophic view of it, but a soul-view, a seizing of the inner sense.”⁶

Similarly, if poetry is looked upon as “the rhythmic voice of life”, Sri Aurobindo would have us remember always that “it is one of the inner and not one of the surface voices”⁷. And not one of the inner voices only in any limited sense, for when Sri Aurobindo’s critical consciousness attains the ever-expanding largeness and rapturous intensity of experience this is what he says about the poetic utterance:

“The voice of poetry comes from a region above us, a plane of our being above and beyond our personal intelligence, a supermind which sees things in their innermost and

1. Ibid., p. 22.

2. Ibid., p. 343.

3. Ibid., p. 343.

4. Ibid., p. 343.

5. Ibid., p. 41.

6. Ibid., p. 46.

7. Ibid., p. 316.

largest truth by a spiritual identity and with a lustrous effulgency and rapture and its native language is revelatory inspired, intuitive word limpid or subtly vibrant or densely packed with the glory of this ecstasy and lustre.”¹

Thus, wherever we lay our finger in his principal book of poetic criticism, *The Future Poetry*, we find him telling us always without any sense of hesitation and doubt that “it is always indeed the spirit in him (i.e., man) that shapes his poetic utterance”², and that “whatever poetry may make its substance or its subject, the growth of the power of the spirit must necessarily bring into it a more intense and revealing speech, a more inward and subtle and penetrating rhythm, a greater stress of sight, a more vibrant and responsive sense, the eye that looks at all smallest and greatest things for the significances that have not yet been discovered and the secrets that are not on the surface.”³

We have, no doubt, therefore, that Sri Aurobindo's theory or, to be more exact, experience of poetry is Arnoldian in so far as Arnold subscribes to the view that genuine poetry is conceived and composed in the soul and is the utterance of those who, in Emerson's language, “live from a great depth of being”. Indeed, Sri Aurobindo carries this view to the farthest possible limit and its most logical conclusion by enlightening us on all the implications and aspects of such a view. In one sense, therefore, his poetics, as elaborated in *The Future Poetry* particularly, is but the fullest possible exploration and expansion of Arnold's famous dictum. What was put forward by Arnold as at best a momentary though fairly luminous flash of truth about poetry is turned in his hands into an enduring, almost overflowing ocean of a light ‘that never was on sea or land’ and is yet shown to be the very life-breath and master-spirit of our being and all our becomings. Whereas Arnold remains at best a religiously enlightened and classically cultured Romantic in his approach to poetry, Sri Aurobindo, we shall see in the subsequent pages, appears before us as a truly and fully mature spiritual poet and critic, the epithet “spiritual” being used here in the widest possible sense and clearly distinguished from mere intellectuality, vitality, physicality, sensuous

1. Ibid., pp. 392-93.

2. Ibid., p. 360.

3. Ibid., p. 361.

imaginativeness, religiosity and ethicality, however pure and refined.

The reference to Arnold here should not, however, lead us to think that Sri Aurobindo's spiritual view of poetry is derived from Arnold's dictum. No, it is entirely his own experience and expression. And if at all we are out to seek for some literary affinities to his view outside his own multiple poetic creations and critical utterances, the most appropriate and best literature to go to is that which we get in our ancient Scriptures like the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita, from which Sri Aurobindo appears to derive, if not exactly his actual spiritual experience and knowledge, at least a full confirmation and expression of it. The remarkable fact about Sri Aurobindo's genius, whether literary or non-literary, is that it stands from the first on its own; it is self-made and self-created, or, if we like to put it in spiritual terms, we may say that it is all an act of some large, massive, Divine Grace creatively pouring down upon his soul, which he kept on preparing through his life-long *sadhana* or discipline, whether it was the *sadhana* of extensive as well as intensive literary scholarship in the early years of his life, or of an intense, almost burning political journalism and activity in the middle years of his life, or of an ever-ascending, never-wearying, almost endless spiritual quest and experiment, after he had retired from the so-called politics and worldly aims and activities. He did not, truly speaking, derive his knowledge and inspiration from the ancient Scriptures which he came to study later in life, but he certainly felt encouraged, fortified and self-assured in his many-sided endeavours when he found a felicitous and enriching corroboration of his inner experiences and realisations in those eternal books of wisdom and enlightenment.

The fact being so, I referred to Arnold here only to show how there is a very close and real affinity between him and Sri Aurobindo when they both put so much stress on the soul-element in poetry, and not to prove that Sri Aurobindo derives his critical outlook on this point from Arnold, or for the matter of that, any other European writer who before him had come to discover and express this great truth about poetry and art. It was also to show that when T.S. Eliot, our leading critic of today, thought it fit to criticise Arnold for holding such a view and thereby almost contemptuously show him up as "not altogether the detached poet when he

wrote this line"¹, as only "having been stirred to a defence of his own poetry, conceived and composed in the soul of a mid-century Oxford graduate"², he was, one suspects, rather indulging a little in some personal prejudice and antipathies than conducting himself like a responsible, controlled and detached critic that he otherwise is. Expressions like 'genuine poetry' and 'poetry of the soul' cannot be dismissed in the summary, sarcastic manner Eliot sought to do. These are not the products of the brain-wave of some cranky artists and critics. A whole long tradition of experience and thought ranging from the Vedas to the poetry of Tagore and Yeats and A.E., even of Eliot himself in some of his later poetical phases is there, still standing like a living beacon-light, not only to sustain such a spiritual theory of poetry but to inspire afresh all those creative poetical spirits who dare to go within the utmost depths of their own true psychic being or to mount and ascend upwards into the limitless empyrean heights of the Spirit.

Then, again, if, like Matthew Arnold or A.E. Housman, Sri Aurobindo also betrays a sort of temperamental dislike, instead of an over-enthusiastic admiration, which, through the personal critical efforts of critics like Eliot and Leavis, seems to be the fashion today, of the poetry of Dryden and Pope³ or, for the matter of that, the poetry of wit and intellect, we are not to think that his is a bias which is typically Romantic and probably derived from the Romantic poets and critics or from

1. *Selected Essays*, Faber and Faber, MCMXLV, p. 309.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 309.

3. "I have little temperamental sympathy for much of the work of Pope and Dryden, but I can see their extraordinary perfection or force in their own field, the masterly conciseness, energy, point, metallic precision into which they cut their thought or their verse, and I can see too how that can with a little infusion of another quality be the basis of a really great poetic style, as Dryden himself has shown in his best work. But there my appreciation stops; I cannot rise to the heights of admiration of those who put them on a level with or on a higher level than Wordsworth, Keats or Shelley—I cannot escape from the feeling that their work, even though more consistently perfect within their limits and in their own manner (at least Pope's), was less great in poetic quality." *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Third Series, pp. 265-66.

One cannot fail to perceive here that though like Arnold Sri Aurobindo has "little temperamental sympathy for much of the work of Pope and Dryden", he is more catholic and considerate in his attitude towards these Classical English poets and is alive to their merits in a way which Arnold, for all his critical liberalism, fails to appreciate.

Arnold or A. E. Housman. Once again it is wholly and entirely his own feeling, self-generated and self-maintained. And if, on this ground, we choose to regard him as typically pro-Romantic and anti-Classical—he should really be called anti-pseudo-Classical, for Sri Aurobindo is as good a Classicist as he is a Romanticist—it is once again to show that he is in fairly good company when he betrays such an antipathy. Probably it was justifiably necessary for an intellectual Classical critic like Eliot to declare:

“The nineteenth century had, like every other, limited tastes and peculiar fashions; and, like every other, it was unaware of its own limitations. Its tastes and fashions had no place for Dryden; yet Dryden is one of the tests of a catholic appreciation of poetry. . . . We cannot fully enjoy or rightly estimate a hundred years of English poetry unless we fully enjoy Dryden; and to enjoy means to pass beyond the limitations of the nineteenth century into a new freedom”.¹

But Eliot who in his ardent admiration for the Metaphysical poets and Dryden and Pope and Dr. Johnson turned out to be anti-Milton and anti-Shelley and, in general, anti-Romantic, does not impress us as a critic who has been able to develop truly either “a catholic appreciation of poetry” or the ability “to pass . . . into a new freedom”, at least to the extent of seeing whatever good points there are to be found in those with whom he has little temperamental or intellectual sympathy. It is, indeed, surprising that Eliot can think about Dryden in terms of “a new freedom” which transcends the limitations of the nineteenth century literary taste but is not aware that Shelley, no less than Dryden, is “one of the tests of a catholic appreciation of poetry” and requires, on the part of a critic, the ability “to pass . . . into a new freedom” beyond the limitations of the eighteenth century, particularly in this excessively intellectual and hard scientific age of ours.

But the “freedom” and the “catholicity” which poets like Milton and Shelley require from us are not fully covered by the popular term ‘Romantic’, at least in the way in which we usually mean by it. Milton, according to Sri Aurobindo, is a poet of fine poetic intelligence which is certainly different from the kind of intelligence Dryden’s poetry embodies. Milton’s poetic intelligence is of a deeper and subtler quality than the epigrammatic

1. Eliot—*op. cit.*, pp. 305-06.

wit and antithetical ingenuity of Dryden. And then Milton's religiosity, though not of a true mystical temper, has in it depths and subtleties which are clearly beyond all the rich elegance and brilliant disquisition of Dryden's prudent religiousness. A special kind of imaginative catholicity and spiritual freedom is, therefore, needed before one can properly understand and appreciate his complex as well as sublime poetry. His high-pitched sonorous style, too, is not the product of some artificially-engineered magniloquence, as it has become the fashion to think in our times; it is not rhetorical and high-falutin, for it is the very heaven-high form and image, vigorous voice and articulate vim of the kind of high classical sensibility and intelligence, sublime religious fervour and moral earnestness, rich austerity and purity of a complex pagan-puritan temperament which he alone among the English poets so pre-eminently possessed and ardently, even at times fiercely, vented through his poetry and prose. It is really no joke to understand and appreciate Milton and his peculiar moral-religious sensibility, though it may be easy enough to admire and idolise him from a distance or, on the contrary, to dislike and debunk him in an unthinking zeal. Similarly, Shelley, according to Sri Aurobindo, was alone of all the Romantic poets of the early nineteenth century, "very nearly fitted to be a sovereign voice of the new spiritual force that was at the moment attempting to break into poetry and possess there its kingdom."¹ In a very picturesque but acutely penetrating style Sri Aurobindo says about him:

"If the idea of a being not of our soil fallen into the material life and still remembering his skies can be admitted as an actual fact of human birth, then Shelley was certainly a living example of one of these luminous spirits half-obscured by earth; the very stumblings of his life came from the difficulty of such a nature moving in the alien terrestrial environment in which he is not at home nor capable of accepting its muddy vesture and iron chain, attempting impatiently to realise there the law of his own being in spite of the obstruction of the physical clay."²

This, in my view, is a truer and more 'catholic' and 'free' appraisal of Shelley's peculiar genius, personal

1. *F.P.* p. 178.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

as well as poetic than what Eliot with his contemptuous emphasis on Shelley's 'adolescence', and Arnold with his ironic-fanciful image of an 'ineffectual angel' have given us, each from his own self-satisfied Olympian height of pseudo-understanding. Shelley, as Sri Aurobindo further tells us, was really "a seer of spiritual realities, much more radiantly near to them than Wordsworth."¹ He had "what Coleridge had not, a poetic grasp of metaphysical truths"² and could "see the forms and hear the voices of higher elemental spirits and natural godheads than those seen and heard by Blake."³ He was "the singer of a greater and deeper liberty, purer and nobler revolt than Byron"⁴ and had also "the constant feeling of a high spiritual and intellectual beauty, not sensuous in the manner of Keats, but with a hold on the subtler beauty of sensible things."⁵ He was, indeed, "at once seer, poet, thinker, prophet, artist."⁶

Unless, therefore, a person chooses to be unduly prejudiced against Shelley or supercilious towards him, one cannot help saying that the genius which Shelley represents in English poetry is something rare and unique, though unfortunately, it could not grow into full fruition. Responsible English critics should be able to recognise this and not simply betray the tendency to belittle and condemn him in the way they have hitherto done. He not only deserves something better at their hands but really requires "a new freedom" and a new "catholicity" for understanding him. And the precise nature of this new freedom and catholicity required is neither romantic nor classical, neither imaginative nor intellectual, neither religious nor moral but spiritual in the true sense of the term, i.e., in the sense in which a spiritual knower, and scholar, leader and guide, poet and critic like Sri Aurobindo, for example, understands it.

Critics like C.M. Bowra⁷ and R.A. Foakes⁸ now appear to be increasingly realising the necessity to under-

1. Ibid., p. 179.

2. Ibid., p. 179.

3. Ibid., p. 179.

4. Ibid., pp. 179-80.

5. Ibid., p. 180.

6. Ibid., p. 180.

7. Vide his *The Romantic Imagination*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1957.

8. Vide his *The Romantic Assertion*, Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1958.

stand and interpret English Romantic poetry as a whole in something like spiritual terms and in a manner which is more exploratory, revealing and fruitful than that established and made current by even such a serious-minded and enlightened critic as Arnold. The fact is that the tone and tool of classical romanticism which Arnold bequeathed to English critics are not enough to penetrate deeper and reveal the truer spiritual treasures which lie locked in Romantic poetry. Nor do even these fine modern critics of Romantic poetry, named above, go as deep or far, as we need to, for all the new, subtle and intelligent critical orientation they have been able to effect today towards the Romantics. It is here that Sri Aurobindo's guidance and correct lead become, in my view, absolutely necessary. My feeling is that it is a critic with some spiritual experience and attainment of his own, a critic who, instead of depending exclusively or chiefly upon the intellectual modes and tools of enquiry, learns to turn more and more inward and surrender himself to the intuitive vision and psychic and spiritual guidance within him and call these faculties, more than his conscious intellect, to his aid for the purpose of critical valuation- it is a critic of this kind who is best fitted today to show us the right direction one has to take either as a creative or critical writer, particularly in those domains of feelings and experiences which the Romantic poets, the religious Metaphysical poets, and poets like Milton and Blake chiefly lived in and explored and wrote about.

Hence the supreme need and importance of a creative and critical writer like Sri Aurobindo to us today. There is no doubt that we still live in an age dominated by intellect. The phenomenal growth of Science during these hundred years or so has contributed much towards such a supremacy of intellect. Yet the mighty forces of the Spirit, the intuitive, illuminative, revelatory faculties lodged and locked deep within the being of man have not at all been idle all these years. Instead, they have even subtly and secretly infiltrated into the domains of intellect-led and reason-bound science with the result that the followers of the science of nuclear physics, for example, have been obliged to give up their age-old rigid stand on the reality of matter and become increasingly aware of the mysterious interfusion of matter and energy and their inter-convertibility as well. Similarly, the rapid advances made in recent years by the

science of psychology, particularly those branches of it which are known as psycho-analysis and para-psychology, are deeply shaking those foundations of our knowledge which we had erected on the so-called concrete materials of reason and intellect. The new scientific knowledge of the mysterious, irrational workings and movements of the Unconscious and the rare glimpses of the still subtler movements of the Super-conscious not only in our dreams and unconscious or trance-like movements but our very day-to-day, what we call conscious, life are now increasingly affecting our attitude towards, and understanding of, reason and intellect, our principal instruments of knowledge hitherto. Indeed, the supreme dominance of the logical, analytical, scientific mode of knowledge and of the belief that intellect is our only sure guide and support, lest we should fall into superstition and ignorance, is now gone and humanity is once again entering a newer and stronger and better-fortified age of faith—faith in the inner mysterious faculties and powers of man like intuition, inspiration, illumination, revelation etc. as well as in some supreme Power of all-wisdom which is ever at work behind all the evolutionary forces and movements we are aware of in the universe and which is leading us, whether we will or not, towards some secret supreme goal of its own. The self-confidence of man as a rational, reasoning creature and his all-dependence upon his conscious, intellectual faculties and powers for realising all his aims and ambitions in life, and controlling the entire course of his destiny, individual as well as collective, are now in a state of collapse; and it is right that it should be so, for until we break down the artificial walls of false knowledge and brilliant ignorance which modern science has erected in our life separating us not only from one another but from our own true spiritual being and the being of the divine Reality above and around us, we are likely to move round and round in both a vicious and a dangerous circle. Fortunately for us, as Sri Aurobindo with his powerful, confident accent of spiritual perception tells us, the human intelligence “seems on the verge of an attempt to rise through the intellectual into an intuitive mentality; it is no longer content to regard the intellect and the world of positive fact as all or the intellectual reason as a sufficient mediator between life and the spirit, but is beginning to perceive that there is a spiritual mind which can admit us to a greater and more

comprehensive vision.”¹

Indeed, it is with such a spiritual mind rather than the mind of intellect that Sri Aurobindo has viewed, in this scientific age of ours, everything of life and art and literature. From the very first, one may say, his genius, creative as well as critical, has been naturally and supremely spiritual in spite of the fact that he has ever respected and valued and even used intellect and rationality for what they are worth. But then he has also seen their severe limitations and realised as well the supreme necessity for modern man to transcend these limitations and come to a closer and more invigorating and dependable contact with the infinite riches and powers of the Spirit, if he intends to ascend higher in the scale of consciousness and life.

But when we call his genius or personality spiritual, we should also be able to see this remarkably appealing thing in it that his is not the spirituality of either an ascetic or anchorite or a Vedantist, pure and simple, all of whom simply refuse, each in his own way, to recognise the divinity or spirituality of matter and mind and life. On the contrary, his spirituality is all-embracing and equally dynamic on the inner psychic and outer material levels, on all the different planes of existence, transcendental, universal and individual; physical, vital, mental as well as supramental. It is composed of the harmoniously and integrally united godheads of Truth, Power, Life, Beauty and Delight. It knows the importance and utility of the trinity of matter, mind and spirit in our day-to-day, actual practical life, and realises no less the place and purpose of the vital senses and passions in the well-integrated evolutionary ascent of life. Denying and rejecting nothing, and embracing nearly everything, every evolved part and power of our nature and life, it seeks to put each thing and faculty in its own proper place in the general cosmic plan and meaning of creation. What is more, it seeks to transform the lower faculties by the higher, organise all the various facets and needs of our personality and life round the central psychic being and consciousness. Only the ultimate key to this transformation he finds in what he has called the Supermind, the divine Truth-consciousness which our ancient Vedic seers had no doubt known but whose full dynamics had never before been brought

to bear on the problem of earth's plenary evolution. And as a man of letters, too, his ultimate aim has been to dynamise this very supreme spiritual power through the creative word. We should not hesitate to give him this credit that he has amply prepared the ground for such a dynamisation through his rich and manifold writings both in prose and poetry, in the creative and critical domains on a scale reminiscent of such a versatile literary genius as Vyasa of old and an all-round artistic genius like Leonardo da Vinci of the Middle Ages.

The experience of the Supermind, which is the highest spiritual power so far conceived, is, according to Sri Aurobindo, something which has been but rarely attained by man. In order, therefore, to understand and evaluate the works of one who seeks to write from the overhead planes of inspiration and consciousness, as Sri Aurobindo did, it is but self-evident that it is absolutely necessary to be at least something of a genuine spiritual aspirant and not merely a moral and religious secker and scholar. As such, a critic of Sri Aurobindo, whether he studies his Yoga or philosophy or politics or poetry or literary criticism, has got to be a person of some special bent of mind and some spiritual consciousness and discipline. At any rate, he must himself be a sincere aspirant for the higher, spiritual life. In him there should glow, at least in some measure, the subtle luminous current of faith in the divinity of all life and all creation. Also, his own inner being and outer action should glow and ripple with the ardent hope that a better and higher and nobler destiny awaits the modern man, however darkened and desperate in outlook he may feel at the moment. His task is made all the more difficult when he begins to discover, as he pores over Sri Aurobindo's various works, that the latter's creative literary genius is vast and versatile, manifold and complex, and, what is more, all its multiple facets are subtly and deeply interfused. It is a highly massive and wide-ranging and many-mansioned but all inter-connected verbal piece of architecture before which he ultimately finds himself standing, and his own sense of smallness seems to pursue and hamper him at every step until he himself is seized and lifted up high enough by the superhuman powers of the Spirit.

Quite obviously, the indispensable equipment and discipline needed are difficult to attain for the average educated man of today, even for one who is above the

average. But then, an interesting fact which begins to emerge in course of the regular reading of Sri Aurobindo's works is that these themselves begin to create the kind of taste, *rasa*, and tendency so essential for their evaluation. What Wordsworth said about the growth of the taste necessary for the understanding of the kind of poetry he was writing for the readers of the eighteenth century sensibility and outlook is a truth which holds good for the contemporary reader of Sri Aurobindo as well. Sri Aurobindo's spiritual personality and its varied literary expression stand out on the surface in sharp contrast to all that we find in the values of the present-day material and practical civilisation and rational and scientific mental culture. They, therefore, call for tools of understanding and appreciation which we can hardly find ready to our hands either in the heritage of the past, however rich and diverse, or in the many-sided achievements of the present, however brilliant and impressive on the surface. And the truth begins to dawn upon us that it is not by going outside of the Aurobindonian world and borrowing our critical materials and tools from elsewhere that we can prepare ourselves to understand him. On the contrary, we shall find that the more we get steeped in him honestly and without any bias of any kind, mental, moral or religious, the better we may hope to take him for what he actually is, and neither unduly exaggerate his contributions nor decry them out of any unthinking prejudice or mental reservation or a sense of worldly wisdom.

Already some books of a sufficiently enduring value have been written on his philosophy and Yoga,¹ and there is one—*The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo* by K.D. Sethna—on his poetry too. The doctoral thesis of about 600 pages on Sri Aurobindo's magnificent epic *Savitri: a Legend and a Symbol* by Mrs. Prema Nandkumar of Andhra University is in the press¹. The recently enlarged biography of Sri Aurobindo by Dr. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, D.Litt., Ex-Vice-Chancellor, Andhra University, has also a number of illuminating things to say about the former's literary, specially poetical and dramatic, genius. The sparkling style and exuberant feeling and imagination which inform the book throughout give a definitely literary quality to this comprehensive work on Sri Aurobindo's life and

1. It has now come out in book-form.

achievement. Dr. V. K. Gokak, has also written a fine sketch of Aurobindonian aesthetics in the pages of one of the periodicals of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, *Mother India*.¹

But as yet there is no book, to the best of my knowledge, which seeks to attempt an appraisal of Sri Aurobindo as a literary critic. Mine, it appears, is the privilege to undertake such a venture, modestly though, and now that the Patna University has got two of the major critical works of Sri Aurobindo, namely *The Future Poetry* and *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Third Series, included among the other recommended books of Western, particularly English, literary criticism in the Criticism paper of the M.A. English syllabus, I hope this attempt of mine will be of some use to the teachers and students of modern literary criticism. At a time when, in the literary field, both in the East and the West, there obtains a growing impatience, on the part at least of the thoughtful and serious-minded readers, with the prevailing situation in the creative as well as critical spheres of literary writing, it may, I feel confident, prove beneficial to know even an outline, as given here, of the well-ordered and well-integrated luminous views on poetry, which Sri Aurobindo, the poet-seer, has to give us with so much of sovereign clarity and intuitive as well as intellectual insight into the fundamentals of poetry and its future. It is always a gain to turn to and draw upon an immensely harmonious and comprehensive literary personality whether it is of the East or the West. In the case of Sri Aurobindo, what is still more bracing and enriching is that he represents, as Romain Rolland said, "the most complete synthesis achieved up to the present between the genius of the West and of the East" not only in his general philosophic as well as political and practical vision of life but also in the diverse "realms of gold", as Keats so felicitously called the world of poetry and literature.

We have today several outstanding critics equipped with some of the most up-do-date and sharp critical instruments. There are others whose imaginative sensibility is of fine point and penetrating skill and richness. Some can enunciate nice smart theories just as there are others who can give us brilliant and

1. Vide the issues of October & December, 1953 and January, March, May, June and July, 1954.

exhilarating pieces of applied criticism. But we miss in all this rich and diverse pagantry of modern criticism that confidently serene, towering figure who can luminously weave all these various threads together and unify them into a vast, harmonious design or pattern without feeling any sense of stress and strain, and, rising sufficiently high above the passing fashions and tastes of the hour, can bring about a convincing and healthy fusion of the apparently conflicting and contradictory schools of thought. One of the things which the critical voice of Sri Aurobindo seems to tell us gently and quietly is that without running after false, though temptingly 'strange gods', we may yet succeed in setting up new criteria, bearings, determinations and revaluations not only in the practical but even in theoretical fields which are necessary for us in order to enter, without difficulty, the destined phases of our literary culture in future. I do not know whether the *litterateurs* of today and tomorrow will be able to discern such a sound aesthetic philosopher as well as 'practical' critic in Sri Aurobindo. My present book, however, is inspired by this belief. Whether it is justified or exaggerated, only time can show. In any case, whether others share this belief of mine or not, this seems to be indisputable that a close and honest study of Sri Aurobindo's literary criticism which I have tried to make in the following pages has this important office to perform that it provides that synthetic vision as well as sound and substantial equipment by which we can appreciate at least Sri Aurobindo's own poetic achievement. This achievement is to be found first in his *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vols. I and II, where all possible planes of inspiration have been tapped and expressed and a few dazzling glimpses given of the new spiritual afflatus which massively broke upon us in his epic of 23,813 lines: *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*. This epic is his most characteristic as well as highest poetic creation. Nobody who reads it can fail to see that here is something which seems to have not only gathered in one grand massive sweep all the treasures of English poetry written so far, but done as well, in an opulent measure, that daring thing which the Western creative genius had been so long dreaming about since the breakdown of the Romantic tradition and has been hitherto but clumsily attempting to realise through a number of new-fangled poetic experiments and startling, even shocking expressions and forms.

Chapter 2

SRI AUROBINDO'S LIFE AND WORKS: an outline

1

Sri Aurobindo was born in Calcutta on August 15, 1872 in a highly cultured and accomplished family. It is a significant coincidence that his grandfather from the paternal side was a leader of the Brahmo Samaj movement (reformed 'Hinduism') and was a pupil of David Hare of Calcutta, noted for his educational activities; and his grandfather, from the maternal side, Rishi Raj Narain Bose, was a distinguished and famous man of orthodox Hindu religion and culture. Thus, it is obvious that he was born in an environment or cultural ethos which later on proved to be an amalgam of the genius of the East and the West, of modernism and antiquity, of traditionalism and progressivism. In the beginning, however, i.e., the early formative years of his life, Sri Aurobindo was fully steeped in Westernism and progressivism. The fact was that his father, Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghose, who after receiving medical education at Calcutta had been sent to Aberdeen University for higher medical studies and obtained there the M.D. degree, had returned from England, a thoroughly Anglicised person, imbued with great admiration for the culture of the West. Soon after his return from England he entered the Indian Medical Service and served as Civil Surgeon in various parts of India. No wonder, he was a cosmopolitan and his home was a common meeting place for Europeans and sophisticated Bengalis. His mind had become so much Anglicised that he intensely believed that India must adopt Western ways of life and manners. Naturally, as soon as three of his children—the fourth one was born in England some years later on his second visit to that country—grew big enough to be sent to school, he, under the belief that his children should be given the best of Western education, got them admitted to the Loretto Convent School at Darjeeling. Sri Aurobindo was but five years old at that time. And only after two years i.e., in 1879 he was taken along with his two elder brothers to England for their full grounding

in Western education and Western civilisation. The family of the Drewetts at Manchester with whom they were put up there was given strict instructions to see that the boys did not mix with any Indian and pick up any Indian ways and manners. While he was there, Sri Aurobindo was for some years privately educated by Mr. and Mrs. Drewett, although his two brothers were put in the Manchester Grammar School. Mr. Drewett was an accomplished Latin scholar and he taught this language to Sri Aurobindo so well that when the latter joined St. Paul's School in London in 1885, the Headmaster himself took up Sri Aurobindo personally to ground him in Greek and then pushed him rapidly through the higher classes of the school. Both at Manchester and at St. Paul's in London he gave much attention to the classics, but during the last three years at St. Paul's he paid less attention to these subjects, taking them only casually, and spent all his time outside school in general reading, specially English poetry, literature and fiction, French literature, and the history of ancient, mediaeval, and modern Europe. He spent some time also in learning Italian, some German and a little Spanish. He started writing poetry, too, at this time and spent hours over it. The school studies, during these years, engaged very little of his time; he was already at ease with them and did not think it necessary to labour over them any longer. Nevertheless, besides winning the Butterworth prize in Literature and the Bedford prize in History, he was able to pass out of St. Paul's with senior Classical Scholarship and joined the King's College at Cambridge where he studied for two years. Here also he was able to win all the prizes in one year for Greek and Latin verse and passed high in the First Part of the Tripos, securing first class. It is on passing the First Part that the degree of B.A. is usually given; but as he had only two years at his disposal, he had to pass it in his second year at Cambridge, and the First Part gives the degree only if it is taken in the third year; if one takes it in the second year one has to appear for the second part of the Tripos in the fourth year to qualify for the degree. He might have got the degree if he had made an application for it, but he did not care to do so. A degree in England is valuable only if one wants to take up an academic career.

In 1890 Sri Aurobindo passed the open competition for the Indian Civil Service, securing record marks in

Greek and Latin, but he neglected his lessons in riding and failed to appear in the last riding test. He was, as is often done, given another chance to pass, but he avoided presenting himself in time for the test. On this pretext he was disqualified for the service, although in similar cases successful probationers have been given another chance to qualify themselves in India itself. But the fact was that neither the British Government was eager to take him in on account of its suspicions about his political views and activities - he was already a member of Indian Majlis at Cambridge and had expressed himself in some of his speeches there against the continuance of the British rule in India -, nor did he himself feel any call or charm for the I. C. S. In fact, much against the wishes of his father, he was seeking for some way of escape from that bondage. He, thus, deliberately got himself disqualified without himself rejecting the Service, which his family, particularly his father, would not have allowed him to do.

At the time when he was disqualified for the Indian Civil Service, the Gackwad of Baroda was in London. Sri Aurobindo was introduced to him by the brother of Sir Henry Cotton and obtained an appointment in the Baroda service and left England for India in February 1893.

He served the Baroda State for thirteen years from 1893 to 1906. At first he worked in the Settlement and Revenue Department and was also engaged in Secretariat work for the Maharaja; afterwards he joined the Baroda Government College as Professor of English, and finally became its Vice-Principal. During a short period, from April to September 1905, he also acted as the Principal of this College.

At Baroda he was engaged in considerable literary study and self-culture. Much of the poetry which was afterwards published from Pondicherry was written at this time. Even his epic poem *Savitri* was begun here. In England, as we have already noted, he had received, according to his father's express instructions, an entirely Western education without any contact with the culture of India and the East. At Baroda he made up the deficiency, learned Sanskrit, read the Vedas and the Upanishads in the original, and also gained knowledge of several modern Indian languages, specially Marathi and Gujarati, the two official languages of the Baroda State. He also learnt Bengali—all by himself,—but

the peculiar thing was that though a Bengali, he could never express himself in Bengali with fluency even in conversation. Anyway, his stay at Baroda was significant because it was here that he came to know, at first hand, and assimilate the spirit of Indian civilisation and its forms, past and present. No less significant was the fact that a great part of the last years of his stay at Baroda was spent on leave in silent political activity, for on account of his service and position he could not have taken part in any public activity openly. However, as time passed by, he became more and more intensely engrossed in the work of political emancipation of India and when an almost country-wide agitation broke out as a result of the British Government's decision to partition Bengal in 1905, he got the opportunity to give up the Baroda service and openly join the political movement. He left Baroda in 1906 and went to Calcutta to join as Principal of the newly founded Bengal National College, the nucleus of the present Jadavpur University.

For a period of about eight years, from 1902 to 1910, Sri Aurobindo's life may be taken to be one of intense political thinking, writing and action. At first he worked from behind the scenes, preparing with other co-workers the beginnings of the Swadeshi (Indian Sinn Fein) movement, till the agitation in Bengal provided an opening for the public initiation of more forward and direct political action than the moderate reformism which had till then been the creed of the Indian National Congress. In 1906 Sri Aurobindo came to Bengal with this purpose and joined the New Party, an advanced section, small in number and not yet strong in influence either, which had been recently formed in the Congress. The political theory of this Party was a rather vague gospel of Non-cooperation; in action it had not yet gone farther than some ineffective clashes with the Moderate leaders at the annual Congress assembly behind the veil of secrecy of the "Subjects Committee". When Sri Aurobindo joined it, he immediately sought to instil a new vigour and boldness into it and persuaded its chief leaders in Bengal to come forward publicly as an All-India party with a definite and challenging programme, putting forward Tilak, the popular, scholarly as well as dynamic, Maratha leader at its head, and to attack the then dominant Moderate (Reformist or Liberal) oligarchy of veteran politicians and capture from them the Congress and the country's political life

and destiny. This was the origin of the historic struggle between the Moderates and the Nationalists (called the Extremists by their opponents), which changed altogether the face of Indian politics within an unbelievably short period of two years only. And the rôle of Sri Aurobindo here, though not so visible outwardly, was considerable.

The newly-born Nationalist party put forward Swaraj (independence) as its goal as against the far-off Moderate party's hope of colonial self-government to be realised at some distant date in a century or two through slow, gradual reforms. The principle behind this new policy was self-help or self-dependence; it aimed, on one side, at an effective organisation of the forces of the nation and, on the other, preferred a complete non-cooperation with the Government. Boycott of British and foreign goods and the fostering of Swadeshi industries to replace them, boycott of British law-courts and the foundation of a system of Arbitration Courts in their place, boycott of Government universities and colleges and the creation of a network of National colleges and schools, the formation of societies of young men, which would do the work of police and defence, and, wherever necessary, a policy of passive resistance, were among the immediate items of the programme. Sri Aurobindo hoped to capture the Congress and make it the directing centre of an organised national action, an informal State within the State, which would carry on the struggle for freedom till it was won. He persuaded the party to take up and finance as its recognised organ the newly-founded daily paper *Bande Mataram*, of which he was at the time acting Editor. The *Bande Mataram* whose policy from the beginning of 1907 till its abrupt winding-up in 1908, when Sri Aurobindo was in prison, was wholly directed by him, and had an all-India circulation almost immediately. During its brief but momentous existence it changed the very political mind or consciousness of India which has ever since preserved fundamentally, even amidst its later developments, the stamp which the said paper then put upon it. But the struggle initiated on these lines, though vehement and eventful and full of importance for the future, did not last long at the time. Unfortunately, the country was not yet ripe for so bold a programme, as the *Bande Mataram* had laid down.

Sri Aurobindo was prosecuted for sedition in 1907 but got an acquittal. Up till now he was working mostly

in the capacity of a political writer, and organiser from behind the scenes. But this event coupled with the disappearance or imprisonment of other leaders obliged him to come forward as the acknowledged head of the party in Bengal and to appear on the platform for the first time as a speaker. In 1907 he presided over the Nationalist Conference at Surat where, in the forceful clash of two equal parties, the Congress was broken to pieces. In May 1908 he was arrested, being implicated in the Alipore Conspiracy Case, and kept in detention as an undertrial prisoner for a year in the Alipore Jail. But ultimately no evidence of any value could be found against him and he was again acquitted.

However, when in May 1909 he came out of the jail, he found the party organisation broken, its leaders scattered by imprisonment, deportation or self-imposed exile, and the party itself, existent still, no doubt, but dumb and dispirited and incapable of any strenuous action. For almost a year he strove almost single-handed as the sole remaining leader of the Nationalists in India to revive the movement. He published at this time to aid his effort a weekly English paper, *The Karmayogin*, and a Bengali weekly, the *Dharma*. But in spite of all these sincere and strenuous efforts he was at last compelled to recognise that the nation was not sufficiently trained to carry out his policy and programme. For a time he thought that the necessary training must first be given through a less advanced Home Rule movement or an agitation for passive resistance of the kind created by Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa. But he saw that the hour of these movements had not yet come and he was not their destined leader. Moreover, during his twelve months' detention in the Alipore Jail, which had been spent entirely in reading the Gita and the Upanishads and in intensive meditation and the practice of Yoga, his inner spiritual life was pressing upon him for an exclusive concentration. He resolved, therefore, to withdraw from the political field, at least for a time.

We may briefly refer here to the kind of impression which Sri Aurobindo made upon his countrymen as a political worker. The late Sri Rishabhchandra, a distinguished scholar-inmate of the Ashram, brought out in *The Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, a series of articles

on the life and work of Sri Aurobindo, and, on the basis of the materials which he was able to collect on the political work of Sri Aurobindo, said about him :

"He was one of the foremost leaders of the Nationalist or Extremist party, respected by his fellow-workers and followers as no other leader was respected. He exercised an unparalleled influence upon the youth of the country, who simply adored and idolised him. Even those who differed from him could not help paying homage to his flaming patriotism, his exalted spiritual idealism, his absolute sincerity of purpose, his far-seeing, intuitive intelligence and, above all, the Olympian grandeur of his soul, which was a rare blend of selfless, universal love, an indomitable will to conquer the freedom of India for the good of humanity, and an utter self-effacing humility, which steered clear of all lime-light and was content only to dare and achieve."¹

Indeed, an idea of his "utter self-effacing humility which steered clear of all lime-light" and attributed everything to the Divine Wisdom and the Divine Will alone, can be had from the following :

"The Will of Divine Wisdom is the sole law of revolutions, and we have no right to consider ourselves as anything but mere agents chosen by the Wisdom....Do we serve the Mother for a reward or do God's work for hire ? The patriot lives for his country because he must; he dies for her because she demands it. That is all."²

Among the several attributes paid to him by the then political leaders, we single out only three which will be quite sufficient to corroborate Sri Rishabhchandra's views, as stated above. Bipin Chandra Pal, than whom there was no more eloquent exponent of Indian nationalism in those days, writes about him thus :

"...Aravinda seems distinctly marked out by Providence to play in the future of this movement a part not given to any of his colleagues and contemporaries....His only care is for his country....the mother as he always calls her....Nationalism....at its best, a concern of the intellect with some, at the lowest, a political cry and aspiration with others....is with Aravinda a supreme passion of his soul. Few, indeed, have grasped the force and meaning of the Nationalist ideal as Aravinda has

1. *The Bulletin* op. cit., April 1962 pp. 108-110.

2. Sri Aurobindo : *Bande Mataram* dated 9-2-1908.

done....”¹

Lokmanya Tilak, another great Nationalist leader of modern India, who knew Sri Aurobindo intimately, wrote very appreciatively about him in some of his editorial comments in the *Keshari*. A free English rendering of some of his tributes runs as follows:

“None is equal to Aravinda in self-sacrifice, knowledge and sincerity....It is a dispensation of benign Providence that persons like Aravinda have been drawn to the national work....His failure in the Indian Civil Service examination was a blessing in disguise....His erudition, *sattwic* temperament, religious mind. and self-sacrifice....He writes from divine inspiration, *sattwic* intelligence, and unshakable determination”².

Lala Lajpat Rai, another distinguished and brave nationalist of those days, spoke about him in his book *Young India*:

“...above all, he is deeply religious and spiritual. He is a worshipper of Krishna and a highsouled Vedantist.... His notions of life and morality are pre-eminently Hindu and he believes in the spiritual mission of his people....”³

To continue our life-story of Sri Aurobindo now. In February 1910 on getting an *adesh*⁴ he withdrew to a secret retirement at Chandernagore but did not stay there long, for in the beginning of April he sailed for Pondicherry in the South and reached there on the 4th instant. The British Government, however, was still pursuing him and a third prosecution was launched against him at this moment for a signed article in the *Karmayogin*; in his absence it was pressed against the printer of the paper, who was convicted. However, the conviction was quashed on appeal in the High Court of Calcutta.

When Sri Aurobindo had left Bengal and politics, he had done so with an idea of temporary withdrawal only but soon the magnitude of the spiritual work given to him from above began to be clear to him and he saw that it would need the exclusive concentration of all

1. *Character Sketches*—Bipin Chandra Pal, quoted in *The Bulletin* op. cit., April 1962 pp. 110-112.

2. Quoted in *The Bulletin*, op. cit. p. 114.

3. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 114.

4. “Adesh” literally means ‘direction’, ‘indication’, but here it would be equivalent to nothing less than ‘the divine call’, for by this time Sri Aurobindo had come to feel and believe that all his actions and thoughts were guided as well as chosen by the Divine Himself.

his energies. Eventually, he cut off all connection with politics and repeatedly declined to accept the presidency of the Indian National Congress and went into a more or less complete retirement at Pondicherry. Throughout his stay at Pondicherry from 1910 to 1950, except for two or three occasions when he came out with some political statements and suggestions, he remained more and more exclusively devoted to his spiritual work and *sadhana*.

The following letter written by him to Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das round about 1925 unmistakably explains the reasons for his complete retirement from active politics in order to devote himself exclusively to his spiritual work and discipline and shows the indomitable spirit of determined earnestness of purpose with which he now began to work for the benefit of all mankind :

"I see more and more manifestly that man can never get out of the futile circle, the race is always treading until he has raised himself to a new foundation. I have become confirmed in a perception which I had, always, less clearly and dynamically then, but which has now become more and more evident to me, that the true basis of work and life is the spiritual; that is to say a new consciousness to be developed only by *Yoga*. But what precisely was the nature of the dynamic power of this greater consciousness ? What was the condition of its effective truth ? How could it be brought down, mobilised, organised, turned upon life ? How could our present instruments,— intellect, mind, life, body— be made true and perfect channels for this great transformation ? This was the problem I have been trying to work out in my own experience, and I have now a sure basis, a wider knowledge and some mastery of the secret. . . I have still to remain in retirement. For I am determined not to work in the external field till I have the sure and complete possession of this new power of action."¹

His whole outlook on life and its problems as well as his whole idea of the mode of action to solve them had, thus, undergone a radical transformation, and there could not be now for him any question of going back to old life and old methods of work.

In 1914, after four years of silent *Yoga*, he began the publication of a philosophical monthly, the *Arya* which

1. Quoted in Dr. Iyengar's *Sri Aurobindo*, Asia Publishing House, Calcutta, 1950, pp 368-69.

immediately bore witness to the new vision and "new power of action" which he had acquired. Most of his major works which have since been published in book form, such as *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Human Cycle*, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, *The Secret of the Veda*, *Foundations of Indian Culture*, *The Future Poetry*, his translations of, and commentary on, the principal Upanishads etc., originally appeared serially in this very philosophical monthly which may be said to establish a landmark in the history of Indian literary and spiritual-philosophical and socio-political journalism. The various series of articles which were written by him single-handed covered a wide gamut of knowledge and inner realisations, including those of Indian civilisation and culture, human history and human unity, the nature and evolution of poetry. It is, indeed, a very remarkable feat which he accomplished in modern times or which has ever been achieved in human history by a single human being. However, *The Arya* ceased publication in 1921 after six years and a half of uninterrupted appearance.

At Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo lived at first in retirement with four or five disciples only. Afterwards more and yet more people began to come to him to follow his spiritual path and after some years the number became so large that a community of *sadhaks* i.e., spiritual aspirants, had to be formed for the maintenance and collective guidance of those who had left everything behind them for the sake of a higher life. This was the foundation of Sri Aurobindo Ashram which has really grown around him as its centre rather than been founded by him.

A word about his Yoga will not be out of place here. He did not begin its practice before 1905, although he had some sudden and remarkable spiritual experiences earlier. He at first realised in himself the truth of the Yogic disciplines already known to the world but a life-long explorer and determined seeker of the very highest Truth that he was, he did not stop there but passed on in search of a fuller and more complete experience of the integral and infinite Reality, which, in fact, meant the most difficult task of uniting and harmonising the two ends of existence, Spirit and Matter. Most ways of Yoga are paths to the Beyond leading to the Spirit and, in the end, away from life. On the contrary, Sri Aurobindo's Yoga rises to the Spirit to redescend with its gains bringing the light and power and bliss of the Spirit

into life to transform it. Man's present existence in the material world is in this view or vision of things a life in the Ignorance with the Inconscient at its base, but even in its darkness and nescience there are involved the presence and possibilities of the Divine. The created world is not a mistake or a vanity and illusion to be cast aside by the soul returning to heaven or Nirvana, but the scene of a spiritual evolution by which out of this material Inconscience is to be manifested progressively the Divine Consciousness in things. Mind is the highest term yet reached in the evolution, but it is not the highest of which it is capable. There is above it a Supermind or eternal Truth-Consciousness which is in its nature the self-aware and self-determining light and power of a Divine Knowledge. Mind is really an ignorance seeking after Truth, but the Supermind is a self-existent knowledge harmoniously manifesting the play of its forms and forces. It is only by the descent of this Supermind that the all-round integral perfection of man and his life, dreamed of by the true *elite* of humanity, can come. It is possible by opening to a greater divine consciousness, to rise to this power of light and bliss, discover one's true self, remain in constant union with the Divine and bring down the Supramental Force for the transformation of mind and life and body. To realise this possibility has been the dynamic aim of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga. And, in fact, throughout his 40 years' stay at Pondicherry, he remained constantly and intensely at work in order to realise the fulfilment of this dynamic Yoga of integral transformation of life. The 24th November, 1926, is an important day in his life. It is usually called his *Siddhi* day or day of Realisation. But as he himself attested, this realisation was only that of the Overmind in his life and body; that is to say, he had realised in himself that consciousness and power which had been attained by Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, the famous trinity of the Indian religious mythology, or by Lord Krishna of Mahabharata fame. Not that Sri Aurobindo did not have at that time the knowledge of the Supermind which is higher than the Overmind to which all these Godheads belong, but he had only the knowledge of it, more or less, and, therefore, even after this *Siddhi* day of 1926, he went on pursuing and perfecting his inner *sadhana* in order to bring down the Supramental Light and Power on the earth, for he felt convinced that without the dynamic descent of the

Supermind, the age-old problems of man both in his individual and collective capacities would not be radically solved, and that the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth about which the seers and prophets of the past had spoken would not be a fact here. And if we believe the words of Madame M. Alfasa of Sri Aurobindo Ashram the Mother, as she is popularly called —, who has been his collaboratrix since 1914—indeed, even the publication of *The Arya* by Sri Aurobindo was actually started on her initiative and has been in charge of the Ashram at Pondicherry since 1926, we find that by his death on December 5, 1950 Sri Aurobindo actually succeeded in bringing down this Supramental Light in his own body which collapsed no doubt but nonetheless became instrumental in fixing this new light in the Earth-substance. It is she, again, who has been declaring since the 29th February 1956, that this new Supramental Light has now not only descended upon the earth once for all but actually started influencing and modifying the conditions, the very stuff of the earthly existence, though it is true that as yet its working is on the subtle-physical plane. But she has given us the assurance in a quite clear language that a time will come when its working will be manifest on the gross physical plane, too, and then even the most blind and unwilling among us will be obliged to recognise the presence and working of this new Force.

This, no doubt, is a spiritual truth and a matter essentially of spiritual experience. What is relevant for our purpose to note here is that Sri Aurobindo's whole life has been one of intensely packed activities which since his stay at Pondicherry in 1910 were more internal than external. In any case, it has three distinct divisions: (i) a life of wide and sound scholarship and of academic profession and pursuits, (ii) a life of ardent political thinking, writing and action determined to wrest independence for his country and, failing that, to create conditions, particularly through the infusion of a widespread psychological political consciousness among the people, which would eventually lead to the emancipation of the motherland, and (iii) a life of exclusive spiritual *sadhana* or discipline aimed at a still higher goal which was nothing less than the completest possible liberation of all mankind, nay, of earth itself from ignorance, incapacity, disease and death so that divine life may be established here once for all and the dream of

the ages be actually materially fulfilled not only in one's individual life but in the human race itself, by bringing about a new social order altogether, based upon the peace and harmony, the beauty and delight, the knowledge and power of the spirit itself.

It sounds rather incredible that one single human being could compress during the seventy-eight years of his life all these varied big dreams and aspirations and the naturally outstemming actions and disciplines, involving an immense amount of suffering and sacrifice, vigilance and perseverance, work and meditation. One's scepticism, if any, gets, however, dissolved when one stands before the tremendous mass of his writings¹. Another thing which cannot fail to strike one is the rich variety of subjects

and interests which the Aurobindonian literature covers. His works are as large as life itself or as the aspirations of an intensely creative being. One cannot help saying : sheer God's plenty, indeed. But there is no feeling of Aurobindian multiplicity, and certainly not of chaos, in the which is his universe. The Shakespearean world inspirationally the product of a God-like vital creative its variety and imagination is rather bewildering in agreed on the multiplicity but its critics are not all the underlying principles or even motives which provide The Aurobindonity to that 'multitudinous' creation. on the other hand, unity of vision and idea and purpose, no scope for making visible everywhere and there is also tolerably, discrimination, mistake about it by any, even variety and multiplicity reader. What is more, the service to fill out his big which Sri Aurobindo presses into on a scale and of a magnitude of life and thought are and even in certain respects which leave Shakespeare, ante, far behind.

2

Before we make a brief survey of his various writings, let us get a clear idea of the underlying unity of vision and idea and purpose — hence the underlying unity in fact, to use a crude but popular phrase or teaching, we are better enabled to catch the expression — so that of all he wrote. What Sri Nolini Kaul and substance long disciple of Sri Aurobindo and at Puri, a life-long Secretary

1. During the centenary year of Sri Aurobindo's birth, a un-

as de luxe Library edition of all his works is being published in popular as well as in a limited edition. Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry.

olumes by

of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, has to say about the message of Sri Aurobindo puts the matter which is both difficult and complex, subtle and profound, as briefly, lucidly and simply as is humanly possible.¹

Sri Aurobindo believes in evolution. It is not just a concept or speculative idea to him but a fact of experience, of inner vision. His experience is that creation has a purpose, and man who has been ever growing in consciousness and knowledge moves to a goal. Originally, all was matter, only dead matter. Then out of this dead, inert Matter came Life. And thus the plant world was born, with the first primeval stirring of consciousness. There was again a period of gestation, resulting at the end in a rudimentary mind, a first conscious consciousness and so the animal was born, infused with a streak of spontaneous thinking which went on increasing with the higher forms of animal life. Sensuous mentality gave birth to Mind proper, with thought, reflection, and Man appeared on the conscious scene. A fully awakened consciousness, a characteristic, that can turn round upon itself is the characteristic marking out human consciousness.

Such a progression of evolution is admitted practically on all hands. Only Sri Aurobindo points out two special features of this movement. First, Matter, Life, Mind—these are not distinct or separate entities adding itself after another, the succeeding one coming from where. to the preceding, coming we do not see so, for something. In the very nature of things it can be the contrary, that cannot come out of nothing. Life is involved. Thus, if only can evolve which is already because life was already life came out of Matter, it was already involved. The latter was already involved and hidden in Matter. Similarly, if Mind came out secretly instinct with life, involved in Life and, therefore of Life, it is because Mind the whole chain of gradation fore, also in Matter. Mind and the thing which acts is linked together and is consciousness, whether overt as the binding link at each cross-over, there is not or covert. Second, consciousness but also a reversal of only a rise in the words, the level attained turns consciousness. Higher levels, influencing and moulding back upon the lower.

but a summary of Sri Nolini Kanta Gupta's article on

1. What Sri Aurobindo published in the brochure *The Message of Sri Aurobindo* The Message of Sri Aurobindo Niketan, New Delhi, 1951, pp. 1-9.
and the Ashram

them as far as possible in its own mode and law of existence. Thus when Life appeared in Matter, wherever there was material life, the matter thus taken up by life behaved differently from dead matter. Likewise, a life endowed with mind has a different functioning than mere life. And a body which houses a life and mind moves and acts quite differently from an inert body or even a mere vitalised body. Thus a conscious regulation, even refashioning of his life and body is the very essence of human consciousness.

Further, Sri Aurobindo says that the process of evolution has not stopped but is still continuing and that creation has to rise beyond the level of the mind to another state of consciousness which he calls the Supermind. There will, thus, appear a new type, a higher functioning of consciousness, and consequently, a new race or species will be born on the earth, endowed with this new supra-mental consciousness or power as the ruling principle of its life and action. Out of the rock and mineral came the plant; out of the plant, the animal; out of the animal, man; and now out of man will evolve the superman without any shadow of a doubt.

It is no doubt difficult for the mere mental man, bound to the four walls of reason and mental intelligence, to contemplate the new type of Truth-Consciousness that will be, even as it was difficult for the ape to envisage the advent of his successor, man. But if we ponder over some of the characteristic signs, rudimentary or fragmentary movements of the higher consciousness which are already visible in the mental consciousness even as it is, our doubts and difficulties about the next step of the evolutionary ascent may get considerably removed. Such subtle and mysterious movements as those of Intuition, Inspiration, Revelation etc. which happen, one may say, not infrequently within the domain of normal humanity are, it is quite evident, not the product of reason or logical intelligence but expressions, however mixed and impure at the present stage of human evolution, of that higher mode of consciousness which Sri Aurobindo has called the Supermind. But at present these are mere glimmers and glimpses from elsewhere and man has hardly any control over them. They are beyond his habitual conscious will, they come and go as they like and are not at his beck and call. On the other hand, the Supermind is in full possession of that higher consciousness of which these are faint

beginnings and distant echoes.

Thus, Sri Aurobindo will have us realise that supramentalisation of consciousness is the goal Nature is aiming at and man striving for. This is the next step that the earth and man are taking in their evolutionary urge. Another thing is that up to man evolution has been a natural, spontaneous, unreflecting, unconscious movement, but with man it has become conscious, deliberate and wilful. What was being done before from behind the veil in ignorance will now be done in full knowledge. This will shorten the time factor and telescope into decades or years what would take centuries or more otherwise. Also, when the Supermind establishes itself, there will no more be ignorance but only light, knowledge and increased consciousness. Even at the highest levels of the mind, there is found a mixture of light and darkness, knowledge and ignorance. There is at best a groping, a trial for truth. But at the supramental level, one lives always in full daylight, in the plenitude of knowledge, and is no longer bound to the division and duality inherent in the present human consciousness. Of course, man will not reach the Supermind at one bound: he will have to pass through its lower ranges such as what Sri Aurobindo calls the Overmind and the Mind of Light before he can hope to rise beyond to the native supernal regions of the Supermind.

It may be asked whether it is absolutely necessary for man to rise beyond the mind to the Supermind. To this Sri Aurobindo's reply is that it is indispensable as well as inevitable, for the Supermind alone can transfigure the earthly consciousness and life and enable man to know and apply the very permanent and radical cure for his original sin of Ignorance and Inconscience and grow into a perfect, divine being, which is his ultimate destiny.

It is, then, this vision of the inevitable manifestation of the Supramental Light and Power or Truth-Consciousness in the human as well as general earthly life which Sri Aurobindo constantly and confidently puts before us. But this does not mean a mere individual fulfilment, however glorious and successful, nor will it mean the fulfilment of one limb only of the individual, however deep and high. On the contrary, embracing, as he does, the whole man and the whole society, Sri Aurobindo ever envisages the prospect of a fulfilled life

in society upon earth. Purified of the lower formulation in all the parts of his being and remoulded into the mode and pattern of the supramental Truth-Consciousness, man will grow into a complete, integral, perfect being, expressing and embodying in all his limbs and movements the supreme Reality made up of utter truth and knowledge and power and delight. Likewise, his collective life too will follow the same pattern of an all-round growth and development on the sure basis of the supreme Truth-Consciousness. A new society in which men have found their soul and learnt to live in all by living their own true selves and to live in their own true selves by living in all is the one which Sri Aurobindo visions before us with all the calm and lucid luminosity of the enlightened seer.

This, then, is the experience and vision, or, better still, realisation of Sri Aurobindo; and this is the thing for which he worked and laboured, struggled and suffered, and gave his all.

3

It is this vision of "the whole man and the whole society" which poured forth through his various writings in various ways. The vision is essentially spiritual and truly and effectively communicable to the spirit or spiritual consciousness of man. But Sri Aurobindo was aware from the first that it is still the age of intellect in which man is living; it is his reason which clamours for satisfaction and until the thing or idea, whatever it is in itself, and howsoever intuitive and spiritual it may be in its origin, is made convincing to his reasoning intellect, he will not accept it. As such, Sri Aurobindo took recourse to the method of intellect as well in order to bring home to his readers even those truths and experiences which derive from a source or region far beyond the intellectual field of consciousness. *The Life Divine*, for example, which is one of his major prose works and which seeks to present through a highly elaborate and massively built structure of thought and language his central vision of the whole man fulfilled in a whole society, in what he calls the life divine on earth, is a work of close metaphysical thinking and speculative discourse potent enough to satisfy the reasoning faculty of man. Written, however, as he himself said, from a completely silent mind indeed, nearly all his writings except the earlier ones have been written from a mind which has achieved the quality of

Yogic serenity and silence, for it does not depend upon a close step-by-step rational process of reaching out well-argued conclusions but operates by the intuitive descent upon the mental screen of clearly-revealed forms and images of thoughts and visions in a pure and pellucid, unobstructed and intense stream of movement, *The Life Divine* is yet a close intellectual and philosophical exposition carried on a magnificently sublime and sustained level of revealing reasoning. No wonder, if Sir Francis Younghusband described it as the "greatest philosophical religious work"¹ that has been written in our time; and D. L. Murray wrote of its author:

"He is not an arm-chair philosopher, but a man who, having led a life of intense activity, has retired to brood over it, if one may say so of a Hindu, in the dim light of a Gothic cathedral. In fact, he is a new type of thinker, one who combined in his vision the alacrity of the West with the illumination of the East. To study his writings is to enlarge the boundaries of one's knowledge. . . ."²

It no doubt meant some special effort on the part of Sri Aurobindo to formulate the profoundly inward experiences of the spirit, as embodied in this *magnum opus*, in intellectual terms, and naturally, the readers, too, have to respond to its substance and style neither in the casual, light-hearted manner of the man who is going to participate just in some ingenious piece of debate or mental gymnastics nor in the spirit of an idealising thinker who is called upon to watch the construction of an abstract metaphysical system of thought and belief. The kind of demand which was made on Sri Aurobindo himself while he was engaged in bringing out in *The Arya* the series of articles under the heading, *The Life Divine*, is the demand which he makes—and quite legitimately too—upon his readers. As he wrote in one of the later issues of *The Arya*, "The spiritual experience and the general truths on which such an attempt should be based were already present to us. . . . but the complete intellectual statement of them and their results and issues had to be found. This meant a continuous thinking, a high and subtle and difficult thinking on several lines, and this strain, which we had to impose on ourselves, we are obliged to impose also on our

1. Quoted in Dr. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar's booklet *Sri Aurobindo: An Introduction*, Rao & Raghavan, Mysore, 1961 p. 14.

2. *The Times Literary Supplement*, July 8, 1944.

readers.”¹ Moreover, we must not forget that he was himself a man of letters and a writer of poetry and plays and political articles mostly, and never an academic student of philosophy before he wrote *The Life Divine*. No wonder, if it begins to strike us as a “vast prose symphony”² as we start reading it and its “polyphonic ‘global’ style”³ casts a hypnotic spell on us, and we rise from “this unusual ‘feast of reason and flow of soul’ with the conviction that this is no work of mere philosophy but poetry and philosophy and revelation rolled into one”.⁴ It is this richly synthetic consciousness and substance and style that go into the making of this book that made the Protestant theologian, Otto Wolf hail Sri Aurobindo as “the deepest and most universal phenomenon which modern India has produced”⁵ and the famous modern novelist Dorothy M. Richardson write to Dr. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar: “Has there ever existed a more synthetic consciousness than that of Sri Aurobindo ? Unifying he is to the limit of the term.”⁶

Indeed, this is the large impression which not only this book but nearly all his writings make upon the reader's mind. So deeply and firmly unified and synthesized is Sri Aurobindo's own sensibility or consciousness and, as a result of it, so cool and controlled, though also massive and comprehensive, is his general style of expression and so serene and fortifying are the tones and turns of his thought that if the reader is sensitive enough, he cannot remain unaffected by these qualities for long.

Though not an academic philosopher, yet, in the wide sweep of his own spiritual vision and imagination, Sri Aurobindo succeeds in *The Life Divine*, (which in the editorial language of the London Times Literary Supplement (July 8, 1944) was introduced to its readers, on its publication, “as a great new force in world-thought” and has been since then acclaimed “as the greatest book published in our time”⁷) in covering all the significant

1. *The Arya*, July 1918.

2. Iyengar's booklet, op. cit., p. 15.

3. Ibid., p. 15.

4. Ibid., p. 15.

5. Quoted in Ibid., on p. 15 from a review published in *The Advent*, April 1958, p. 66.

6. Quoted on the flap of the American Edition of *The Life Divine*, 1949.

7. Op. Cit. Iyengar's booklet, p. 15.

philosophical systems or schools of the East and the West. His basic approach, however, is rooted deep in the long ancient tradition of Indian spirituality. In course of a letter written in 1930, he indirectly made his own position clear in the background of this ancient spiritual tradition of Indian thinking and philosophising. In the West, he said, it is thought, intellect, the logical reason which is regarded as the supreme instrument of knowledge, so much so that "even spiritual experience has been summoned to pass the test of the intellect, if it is to be held valid."¹ On the contrary, the method in Indian philosophical thinking, he says, is different. Not that the Indian metaphysicians have not tried to approach the ultimate Truth or Reality through the intellect, but they never gave it the place of highest importance or looked upon it as the highest term of reference. On the contrary, "the first rank has always been given to spiritual intuition and illumination and spiritual experience".² All intellectually discovered and formulated truths must pass the test of the spiritual experience or spiritual intuition or illumination and not *vice versa*. Then, again, the Indian metaphysical thinker, he continues to say, has almost always been a Yogi and, therefore, seeks to make his philosophy "a practical way of reaching to the supreme state of consciousness, so that even when one begins with Thought, the aim is to arrive at a consciousness beyond mental thinking".³

The Life Divine is, therefore, a philosophical or metaphysical book written in this ancient spiritual tradition, and yet the intellect is sought to be satisfied at every step as best as possible. The first twenty-eight chapters are concerned with the exploration of omnipresent Reality and the Universe, and in course of it he naturally reveals the truth of the present human predicament and the dualities of the phenomenal world. At the two ends of the scale of existence we find Matter and Spirit and there does not appear to be any very satisfactory way of bridging the wide gulf between the two which evolution has in course of time brought out. The position, broadly speaking, has so far been that the materialist denies the existence or truth of the Spirit altogether, whereas the

1. Sri Aurobindo : *The Riddle of this World*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1951, p. 29.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

ascetic refuses to have any dealing whatever with Matter. The former believes that it is some blind physical force only which is behind the drama of this evolutionary existence, life evolving out of matter and mind out of life, and has hardly any idea of further evolution beyond the mind. The latter takes the supraphysical reality of the Spirit as the only reality that has a real existence and is worth striving and living for, and the world of physical matter which we take to be real is to him merely an appearance, an illusion, and, therefore, a hindering veil which covers the face of the truth of the spirit which alone matters. As such, he would like to cut himself completely away from material existence in order to realise himself truly and fully in the Spirit and does not bother to enquire how his highly-coveted truth of the Spirit can manifest itself in existence except through some material instruments or moulds. In this way the schism between the ascetics and the materialists has gone on widening through the ages, and modern man stands perplexed at this ever-increasing rift. Sri Aurobindo's experience has shown that if mind came out of life and life out of matter, it is but simple logic to assume that they were already 'involved' in the existence as we know it, for nothing alone can evolve out of nothing and if something, particularly some new element, comes out of a thing, it simply means that that 'something' was already involved in that 'thing'. The whole tree, for example, is already 'involved' in the seed of it; the whole man is 'involved' in the sperm which gives birth to a child. On the basis of this kind of argument Sri Aurobindo establishes the truth that the supreme reality is what the ancient Indian sages and seers have called *Satchidananda* and it is this truth of the Supermind which is fully 'involved' in our phenomenal world. And so it is but the recovery of the knowledge and power of the Supermind that can bring about a higher term of existence than we have at present. As such, we are left with no other alternative than to transcend the limits of the triune reality of matter-life-mind—our present level of conscious living—in order to usher in the fullness of the divine life here.

But it may be asked : if it is the Supermind which is, paradoxically speaking, the root-power behind the creation of this phenomenal world, how is it that we had a fall from it to this world of suffering and pain, ignorance and incapacity, darkness and death, really a fall from Light to Night and from Immortality to Mortality ? Sri

Aurobindo answers this question in course of the next fourteen chapters and gives a new and comprehensive enough meaning and analysis of what the philosophers have called the Ignorance. The seven-fold character of Ignorance is one of the most original and illuminating contributions of Sri Aurobindo to the metaphysical thought of the world.

After having discussed this question, Sri Aurobindo devotes his next fourteen chapters to the enquiry and discovery of how we can get back what we have lost, namely, Knowledge, Power, Delight, Immortality, etc. That such a possibility is there is inherent in the very evolutionary law operative on the earth. At any rate, Sri Aurobindo has no doubt in his mind about it. That is why, he says :

“A return or a progress to integrality, a disappearance of the limitation, a breaking down of separateness, an overpassing of boundaries, a recovery of our essential and whole reality must be the sign and opposite character of the inner turn towards Knowledge. There must be a replacement of a limited and separative by an essential and integral consciousness identified with the original truth and the whole truth of self and existence.”¹

This, however, entails a whole process of ascent through the levels of the Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition and Overmind to the Supermind. Once again, the description of these higher regions of the Overhead Consciousness, given in as precise and luminous a language as any creative thinker and writer can do, is an original contribution to the philosophic and spiritual thought of man. And once again, Sri Aurobindo is quite certain of the process which man has to follow to reach the goal of the Supermind. The change from the mind to the Supermind has, in the very nature of things, to obey “the logic of successive unfolding”² and it can be effective “only when the previous main step has been sufficiently conquered”³ till the whole “stair of ascension is transcended and there is an emergence of those . . . native spaces of a consciousness which is supremely luminous and infinite”.⁴ But this need not take now aeons, nor millenniums, nor even centuries; a few chosen spirits

1. *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo International University Centre Collection, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1955, p. 755.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 1109.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 1109

4. *Ibid.*, p. 1111

might be able to effect the transition from earth-nature to supernature in a few quick assured steps, and this is the main hope which Sri Aurobindo holds out to the despairing humanity today. And yet the transformation of a few chosen spirits will not be enough for bringing about the true divine life on earth, which, according to him, is the ultimate goal of evolution here; and so he has to add the following to the grand vision of the change from the mind to the supermind :

"Even when achieved, the individual change will have a permanent and cosmic significance only if the individual becomes a centre and a sign for the establishment of the supramental Consciousness-Force as an overtly operative power in the terrestrial workings of Nature,—in the same way in which thinking Mind has been established through the human evolution as an overtly operative power in Life and Matter. This would mean the appearance in the Evolution of a gnostic being or Purusha and a gnostic Prakriti, a gnostic Nature...."¹

This, therefore, is the large and beautiful dream and vision, hope as well as promise of the heavenly life upon earth. It is a dream and a vision which has "beckoned to us from afar for ages and ages, and always, as men have approached it, it has disconcertingly receded into the distance".² Quoting Aldous Huxley, Dr. Srinivasa Iyengar says that he has written about this human dream rather wistfully and resignedly voicing the feelings of many millions of us :

"The earthly paradise, the earthly paradise ! With longing, between the bars of my temperament, do I peer at its bright landscape, how voluptuously sniff at its perfumes of hay and raspberries, of honey-suckle and roast duck, of sun-warmed flesh and nectarines of the sea : But the bars are solid; the earthly paradise is always on the further side. Selfhindered, I cannot enter and make myself at home....The mind is its own place and its tendency is always to see heaven in some other place."³

Alas ! for such a temperament and such a mind as Huxley betrays here ! If somebody's vision of the earthly paradise gets concretised only with reference to the "perfumes of hay and raspberries, of honeysuckle and roast-duck" and if his temperament remains "self-

1. Ibid., p. 1145

2. K. R. S. Iyengar : *Sri Aurobindo* (bigger volume) op. cit. p. 235.

3. *Texts and Pretexts*, Phoenix Edition, p. 75.

hindered" and his mind refuses to come out of the prison-bars of egoistic ignorance, for him, no doubt, the earthly paradise will always appear to be precariously existing "on the further side...in some other place". At any rate, this is quite obviously poles apart from Sri Aurobindo's vision and dream of the divine life on earth and he has spared no pains to point out how for the fulfilment of it quite a lot of intense effort and sustained *sadhana* or discipline is needed. In such books as *The Synthesis of Yoga* and such collections of letters as *Bases of Yoga*, *Lights on Yoga*, *More Lights on Yoga*, *The Riddle of this World*, and several hundred other letters (published as well as yet unpublished),¹ Sri Aurobindo points out how "the winding upward way to the Heights of Realisation"² is to be traversed by the seeker of the divine life. The spiritual disciplines and techniques needed for such a realisation are here exhaustively dealt with. It is not by mere wistful or wishful thinking or poetical imagining that this difficult goal can be reached; on the contrary, a long, arduous and sustained battle-like effort towards utmost self-exceeding and self-expansion into the realities which are cosmic and transcendent is constantly needed.

Likewise, the effects of such supramental transformation of our nature on our social and political life as well as our artistic, particularly, poetic consciousness and techniques and forms of artistic expression, are described in detail in such works as *The Human Cycle*, *The Ideal of Human Unity* and *The Future Poetry*. We may get, for example, some idea of the spiritualised society of the future from the following :

"A spiritualised society would live like its spiritual individuals, not in the ego, but in the spirit, not as the collective ego, but as the collective soul...A spiritualised society would treat in its sociology the individual, from the saint to the criminal, not as units of a social problem to be passed through some skilfully devised machinery and either flattened into the social mould or crushed out of it, but as souls suffering and entangled in a net and to be rescued, soul growing and to be encouraged to grow, souls grown and from whom help and power can be drawn by the lesser spirits who are not yet adult. The aim of its economics

1. Now most of these works concerning Sri Aurobindo's Yoga of Transformation has been published in a three-volume edition entitled *On Yoga* by the Ashram Press.

2. Iyengar's booklet on *Sri Aurobindo*, op. cit., p. 17.

would not be to create a huge engine of production, whether of the competitive or the co-operative kind, but to give to men—not only to some but to all men each in his highest possible measure—the joy of work according to their own nature and free leisure to grow inwardly, as well as simply rich and beautiful life for all. In its politics....it would regard the peoples as group souls, the Divinity concealed and to be self-discovered in its human collectivities, group souls meant, like the individual, to grow according to their own nature and by that growth to help each other, to help the whole race in the one common work of humanity.”¹

And as regards the problem of human unity and world peace, Sri Aurobindo is quite clear about it also and gives us the definite assurance that human unity is not only possible but inevitable. The race has been obviously groping towards it for some centuries. But unfortunately it is as yet groping and hence we have all these tensions, jolts, setbacks, and not only spells of cold war but actual outbreaks of even global conflict. But if, suggests Sri Aurobindo, the leaders and statesmen of the world as well as those others upon whom the destiny of whole nations depends could subscribe to the concept—it is really not so much a concept of the mind as an actual revelation of the truth²—of a unified spiritual evolution of the entire mankind on earth, the pace of progress towards the ideal of human unity could be quickened and the goal would not then be far off. Unfolding his vision of future humanity Sri Aurobindo writes :

“A spiritual religion of humanity is the hope of the future....

A religion of humanity means the growing realisation that there is a secret Spirit, a divine Reality, in which we are all one; that humanity is its highest vehicle on earth, that the human race and the human being are the means by which it will progressively reveal itself here.... A spiritual oneness which would create a psychological oneness not dependent upon any intellectual or outward uniformity

1. Sri Aurobindo : *The Human Cycle*, American Edn. 1950 pp. 284-6.

2. It is, indeed, a revelation which goes back to the very ancient Vedic times. In course of a speech during his political life Sri Aurobindo said to an audience struggling for political freedom :

“Something must come from you which is to save the world. That something is what the ancient Rishis knew and revealed.... (they saw) beyond the unity of the nation and envisaged the ultimate unity of mankind.”—*Speeches of Sri Aurobindo*.

and compel a oneness of life not bound up with its mechanical means of unification, but ready always to enrich its secure unity by a free inner variation and a freely varied outer self-expression, this would be the basis for a higher type of human existence.”¹

Dr. Srinivasa Iyengar rightly says that long before Wendell Wilkie and others spoke of “one world”, Sri Aurobindo had not only dreamed of it and visioned it but also projected it before us in a vivid, realistic and serenely confident language. Indeed, if we look at the truth about the present human race without wearing any kind of glass upon our eyes, we cannot fail to see that humanity is left with only two alternatives: either it seizes the quitesential truth of its original oneness and achieves peace and goodwill and creative harmony on earth, or it should be prepared for its own virtual extinction, and to be written by the Master of Evolution as a failure, like the giant lizards of the past. As Sri Aurobindo would like us to choose the former, he provides us with the needed light of knowledge through these major writings like *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *The Human Cycle*, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, *The Future Poetry* so that we may have the true basis of hope and perseverance and courage in our advance towards the new life and the new creation which are in store for us.

The key to the new creation, the new life based upon a new consciousness is, as we have seen, the Supermind. It is, in many respects, a new concept, no doubt, particularly in so far as the dynamic role of it has been revealed by Sri Aurobindo in the organisation of the new human race and the new spiritualised society. But it is also in the authentic line of ancient Indian spiritual thought as it has found immortal expression principally in the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*, and, to some extent, in the *Gita* as well. Sri Aurobindo brings this out “with daring interpretative intuition and overwhelming force of demonstration”² in such works as *The Secret of the Veda*, *Essays on the Gita* (2 volumes) and his commentaries on some of the *Upanishads* like the *Isha*, *Kena* and *Katha*.

In the years (1910-1914) of his intense silent Yoga at Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo was deeply absorbed in the Vedic studies, and in course of his study and meditation he came upon a meaning and interpretation of the

1. Sri Aurobindo: *The Ideal of Human Unity*, American Edn. 1950 pp. 322-3.

2. Dr. Iyengar's booklet, *Sri Aurobindo*, An Introduction, p. 9.

Vedas which was quite new and different from the current interpretation, as given by both Western and Indian Sanskrit scholars. The Vedas had been interpreted in the past either as a ritual system after the Purva Mimansa and the commentaries of Sayana, or, latterly, as a naturalistic body of knowledge after the elucidations of Western scholars and their Indian camp-followers. But Sri Aurobindo felt that neither the ritualistic nor the naturalistic gloss really brought out the truth or soul of the matter, and that there must be something more than meets the eye in the Vedic Riks. He had no doubt that these Riks were the inspired utterances of the Rishis who were master-poets and that they were all the time employing a highly symbolic mode of expression. In the realisation of this truth he was helped by his own spiritual experiences he was having at the time. As he was himself living at that time "in a kindred world of spiritual effort and aspiration", it did not take him long to discover the Vedic world of symbolism and spiritual knowledge; and in due course, the whole secret of the meaning of the Riks stood revealed to his inner understanding. He, therefore, clearly declared that "...the central idea of the Vedic Rishis was the transition of the human soul from a state of death to a state of immortality by the exchange of the Falsehood for the Truth, of divided and limited being for integrality and infinity. Death is the mortal state of Matter with Mind and Life involved in it; Immortality is a state of infinite being, consciousness and bliss."¹ Once he caught hold of the central idea of the Veda, it did not prove difficult to him to unravel the subsidiary or linked symbolism of the Riks and thus the Vedic godheads like Varuna and Mitra, Surya Savitri and Bhaga Savitri, the Ashwins, Saraswati and her Consorts, the Angirasa Rishis, Sarama the Hound of Heaven, Dasyus the Powers of Darkness, the shining Cow, the infinite Mother, all fit into the pattern of the main symbolism of the "conquest of the Truth out of the darkness of Ignorance and by the conquest of the Truth the conquest also of Immortality".² Sri Aurobindo's own translation of the Riks, his commentaries and his interpretations brilliantly reinforce his main position, and one feels that the 'hidden secret' of the Vedas

1. Sri Aurobindo : *On the Veda*, Sri Aurobindo International University Centre Edition, 1956, p. 53.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 277-8.

is a secret no more. Seen and understood in the light of Sri Aurobindo's elucidations and interpretations, the Rig Veda "ceases to be an obscure, confused and barbarous hymnal; it becomes the high aspiring Song of Humanity; its chants are episodes of the lyrical epic of the soul in its immortal ascension".¹ Ordinarily, *Yajna* or sacrifice is taken to be just a form of ritual but Sri Aurobindo reveals its inner occult significance and truth when he says:

"The image of this sacrifice is sometimes that of a journey or a voyage; for it travels, it ascends; it has a goal.... It has to climb, led by the flaming strength of the divine Will.... its aim is to arrive at the far-off ocean of Light and Infinity...."²

Similarly, he says:

"The Vedic deities.... manifest the cosmos and are manifested in it. Children of Light, Sons of the Infinite, they recognise in the soul of man their brother and ally and desire to help and increase him by themselves increasing in him so as to possess his world with their light, strength and beauty."³

When he, next, turned to the Upanishads and the Gita, he found in them a continuation and a development of the same spiritual tradition as the Veda embodied. His *Essays on the Gita* are, in fact, a masterly exposition of the original song celestial. Nearly each verse of the original is paraphrased and elaborated there and, as Dr. Iyengar says, "Lord Krishna's uttered and unuttered thoughts are sifted, arranged, expanded, illustrated."⁴ One of the remarkable powers of insight which Sri Aurobindo displays here is brought out in the way he relates the Gita idea of sacrifice with the Vedic one, and, at the same time, brings it very close to the modern psychological interpretation of it and thus makes it quite convincing to the modern reader. Having explained the secret and the true meaning of sacrifice he says:

"Thus it dwells on the ancient Indian system and idea of sacrifice as an interchange between gods and men.... but we find here a sense so entirely subtle, figurative and symbolic given to the word 'sacrifice' and the conception of the gods is so little local or mythological, so entirely cosmic

1. Ibid., p. 439.

2. Ibid., p. 432.

3. Ibid., p. 433.

4. Booklet on *Sri Aurobindo*, op. cit., p. 11.

and philosophical that we can easily accept both as expressive of a practical fact of psychology and general law of Nature and so apply them to the modern conceptions of interchange between life and life and of ethical sacrifice and self-giving as to widen and deepen these and cast over them a more spiritual aspect and the light of a profounder and far-reaching Truth.”¹

Another remarkable feature of Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita* lies in the fact that unlike most commentators he does not attempt at all to fit the living message of the Gita to any particular system of philosophy or religious thought or even any particular aspect of spiritual realisation. As always, Sri Aurobindo's approach is even here integral and total, for, in fact, he discovers in the *Gita* a living spiritual message covering all sides of human nature, psychology and life. What is more, it is not merely a spiritual book concerned with a message which can be philosophically formulated but a living human document as well concerned with an eternally significant and living human situation which repeats itself in the life of nearly every sensitive human being in a greater or less degree. Here we find the Divine meeting the sensitive human soul not on any abstract metaphysical level only but in a moving and commonly sharable human situation as well. No wonder, if Sri Aurobindo writes out his 'Essays' more as a poet than a metaphysician, more as a seer than a dialectician, however brilliant. He sees through the accumulated masses of controversial exegesis and the *Gita* appears to him as “a wide, undulating, encircling movement of ideas which is the manifestation of a vast synthetic mind and a rich synthetic experience....it is a gate opening on the whole worth of spiritual truth and experience and the view it gives us embraces all the 'provinces of that supreme region.’”²

As to the felicitous mode of exposition, Dr. Iyengar says :

“Like the true teacher, Sri Aurobindo leads us gently on, pausing and recapitulating from time to time....making us consolidate the gains at each step....calling upon us to fix our gaze at the highest heights while resting our feet on firm ground, and bringing us safely through the circuits and slippery crags of the Hill of Yoga to the 'ultima thule' of the spirit. The sinuosity of the argument and the

1. Sri Aurobindo : *Essays on the Gita*, American Edition, 1950 pp. 5-6.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.,

sensitive adequacy of the style are worthy of the great theme, and sometimes Sri Aurobindo throws out flashes of epigrams, and sometimes achieves a global fullness and manifoldness of expression.”¹

The Gita has been commented upon so frequently and from so many points of view that it seems as if all possible meanings and interpretations of it have been exhausted. It is, therefore, quite astonishing, indeed, how Sri Aurobindo could yet succeed in making his thousand-page treatise “not a whit superfluous, not a whit second-hand or disagreeably obvious, but rather a radiant re-evocation of the *philosophia perennis* embodied in the Lord’s song. With the *Gita* in one hand (if, indeed, it is not already in one’s memory) and the *Essays* in the other, the reader’s eyes shift to and fro, his imagination is powerfully roused, his intellect is excitedly alive and the poem and the commentary are seen to cross and recross till at last they fuse into a stream of revelation and glow on for ever.”²

These, then, are the major prose works of Sri Aurobindo, to which we could make a reference here but perfunctorily for lack of space. But even his minor works, whose number is quite large, have, each, an importance of their own. Indeed, they are minor only in the sense that they are short in length and mostly collection of essays written on various occasions either for the journals which he edited during his political days, such as *Bandemataram* and *The Karmayogin*, or his epoch-making philosophical monthly *The Arya*. Otherwise, from the points of view of both style and substance they are of no less importance, charm and appeal than his major works. And then, there is a whole legion of letters which he wrote, nearly on every conceivable subject. These letters have been published in book-form in four volumes but many are still coming out in the Ashram monthlies, quarterlies and annuals.

For lack of space, it is rather difficult to make a mention of all these prose writings of Sri Aurobindo here. But before we close this section on his prose literature, we should like to say a few words about his views on the Indian art as they are to be found chiefly in *The National Value of Art* and *The Significance of Indian Art*. Sri Aurobindo had steeped himself in both Western and Indian art. His intimacy with the Hellenic and the

1. Dr. Iyengar’s booklet: op. cit., p. 12.

2. Dr. Iyengar’s bigger volume on *Sri Aurobindo*, p. 264. •

Hindu spirit, and the cultural achievements of the West and the East had produced in him, therefore, a catholic, almost universal outlook, and that is why his views on art have a rich educative value for all of us, and a close bearing on his own creative as well as critical works.

Comparing the Indian art with the European, Sri Aurobindo says that while the best European art satisfies "the physical requirements of the aesthetic sense, the laws of formal beauty, the emotional demand of humanity, the portrayal of life and outward reality,"¹ the best Indian art reaches "beyond them and expresses inner spiritual truth, the deeper not obvious reality of things, the joy of God in the world and its beauty and desirableness and the manifestation of divine force and energy in phenomenal creation."²

While reviewing O.C. Ganguly's *South Indian Bronzes*, Sri Aurobindo brought out the very essence of Indian art and how it is to be truly approached, when he said :

"...always one has to look not at the form, but through and into it to see that which has seized and informed it. The appeal of this art is in fact to the human soul for communion with the divine Soul and not merely to the understanding, the imagination and the sensuous eye. It is a sacred and hieratic art, expressive of the profound thought of Indian philosophy and the deep passion of Indian worship. It seeks to render to the soul that can feel and the eye that can see the extreme values of the suprasensuous."³

Indeed, what is essentially true of Indian art is true of all great art. "All great artistic work", says Sri Aurobindo, "proceeds from an act of intuition, not really an intellectual idea or splendid imagination, - these are only mental translations - but a direct intuition of some truth of life or being, some significant form of that truth, some development of it in the mind of man."⁴ This is why the European artist usually fails to achieve this level of artistic greatness, for his object and field are "life, action, passion, emotion, idea, Nature, seen

1. Sri Aurobindo : *The National Value of Art*, Arya Publishing House, Calcutta, 1936, p. 46.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

3. Sri Aurobindo : *Views and Reviews*, Sri Aurobindo Library, Madras, 1946, p. 52.

4. Sri Aurobindo : *The Significance of Indian Art*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1953, p. 22. ,

for their own sake and for an aesthetic delight in them".¹ On the other hand, the Indian artist, at his characteristic best, is engaged rather in disclosing "something of the Self, the Infinite, the Divine to the regard of the soul, the Self through its expressions, the Infinite through its living finite symbols, the Divine through his powers."² What the Indian artist needs primarily is not the anatomical and geometrical knowledge of the human body or of any other object but "a seeing in the self", a knowledge of the spiritual depths. That is why Indian art is primarily "an intuitive and spiritual art and must be seen with the intuitive and spiritual eye"³ and this is something which is required of all great art in some measure or the other.

In another illuminating passage of art-criticism, Sri Aurobindo brings out the essential difference between the Greek sculpture and the Indian. "The Olympian gods of Phidias are magnified and uplifted human beings saved from a too human limitation by a certain divine calm of impersonality or universalised quality, divine type, *guna*; in other works we see heroes, athletes, feminine incarnations of beauty, calm and restrained embodiments of idea, action or emotion in the idealised beauty of the human figure. The gods of Indian sculpture are cosmic beings, embodiments of some great spiritual power, spiritual idea and action, inmost psychic significance, the human form a vehicle of this soul meaning, its outward means of self-expression....The divine self in us is its theme, the body made a form of the soul is its idea and its secret."⁴

Thus it is in a large, luminous and varied manner that Sri Aurobindo has used the prose medium to enlighten us politically, philosophically, psychologically, artistically, socially and culturally and, above all, spiritually. And the mode of expression is no less rich and varied, for we are not to forget that he was a polyglot. As noted before, during his stay in England he gained not only a perfect mastery of English but also a very considerable acquaintance with other modern European as well as Classical languages; and during his stay at Baroda he mastered Sanskrit, Bengali, Gujrati and

1. Ibid., p. 24.

2. Ibid., p. 24.

3. Ibid., p. 27.

4. Ibid., pp. 65-66.

Marathi. Also during the first years of his arrival at Pondicherry he mastered the Vedas and the Upanishads. And by the time he came to edit *The Arya*, the most important literary organ of his self-expression, he had already acquired a vast and varied knowledge of life at first hand, having played the roles of student and teacher, poet and critic, editor and politician, patriot and prophet, and, above all, had come to possess a deep, integral spiritual knowledge as well as wisdom. He had reached a luminous comprehensive centre from where he could survey the whole gamut of life steadily and whole. We thus find in Sri Aurobindo both a polyglot and a polymath. Besides, he had already shown himself as a gifted writer in English, who found it quite easy and natural to turn his thoughts into verse or to give them, in the words of Dryden, "the other harmony of prose". Then, again, not only is the sheer bulk of his writings staggeringly impressive, but even a little acquaintance with them immediately reveals, as Dr. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar so felicitously remarks, that "one is standing before a born lord of language; for Sri Aurobindo scatters words about, at once with precision and liberality; he is both valuble in appearance and compact in effect; and he is so consummate a literary artist that his art ever covers up the traces of its toils, leaving only the well-cut diamond behind".¹ It is but natural, therefore, that such a scholarly and versatile writer should have not one but "many equally significant and triumphant styles; and yet it is not far from the truth to say that Sri Aurobindo's most characteristic means of self-revelation is a poetic, highly ornate, and richly nervous style that recalls English masters like Burton and Browne and Lamb and Landor at different times but is, in fact, *sui generis*, a style which Arjava (J.A. Chadwick) named "global"—and, indeed, the *Arya* style is truly "global" in its opulent sweep and vast comprehension".² All this, no doubt, makes his writings difficult, complex, and recondite to the common reader. But if one can exercise some patience with him and is willing to call forth one's intelligence and powers of understanding over things and matters which penetrate beyond the surface, one cannot fail to fall under the irresistibly hypnotic spell of his rich, beautiful literary style. And yet this

1. Iyengar's bigger volume, op. cit., pp. 225-26.

2. Ibid., p. 226.

does not mean that he is always so poetically charming as to induce a suspension of all powers of intellectual understanding and judgment and ignore the desirable qualities of good expository and argumentative prose. On the contrary, whether we read his stray journalistic essays or colossal thought-structures, we shall find that they are generally distinguished by the classical virtues of clarity and lucidity, balance and symmetry, precision and concision, quiet assurance, dignified phrasing, and, above all, appropriateness to the theme and the mood and the occasion. One does not feel anywhere any weakness or faltering, either at the exordium or at the conclusion, any looseness or thinness in the main edifice of the argument. As Dr. Iyengar tells us again:

“Works like *The Life Divine*, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *The Future Poetry*, *The Psychology of Social Development*,¹ *The Ideal of Human Unity* and *A Defence of Indian Culture*,² are mighty edifices, boldly conceived and executed with both imagination and a minute particularity. Sri Aurobindo has never felt it beneath his notice to attend to details; a true artist, he has always realised that even seeming trifles have their own appointed place in the fulness of the final achievement.”³

This is why, although most of his prose works were written under the peculiar needs of periodical publication, they nevertheless preserve the unity of an organic form and create a unified, sustained impression upon the reader's mind.

A passage like the following, for example, is a typical specimen of the grand style which he could handle with such sovereign ease and mastery:

“All problems of existence are essentially problems of harmony. They arise from the perception of an unsolved discord and the instinct of an undiscovered agreement or unity. To rest content with an unsolved discord is possible for the practical and more animal part of man, but impossible for his fully awakened mind, and usually even his practical parts only escape from the general necessity either by shutting out the problem or by accepting a rough, utilitarian and unilluminated compromise. For essentially, all Nature seeks a harmony, life and matter in their own sphere as much as mind in the arrangement of its perceptions. The

1. Now known as *The Human Cycle*.

2. Now known as *The Foundations of Indian Culture*.

3. Dr. Iyengar's bigger volume op. cit. p. 226.

greater the apparent disorder of the materials offered or the apparent disparateness, even to irreconcilable opposition, of the elements that have to be utilised, the stronger is the spur, and it drives towards a more subtle and puissant order than can normally be the result of a less difficult endeavour. The accordance of active Life with a material of form of which the condition of activity seems to be inertia, is one problem of opposites that Nature has solved and seeks always to solve better with greater complexities; for its perfect solution would be the material immortality of a fully-organised mind-supporting animal body. The accordance of conscious mind and conscious will with a form and a life in themselves not overtly self-conscious and capable at least of a mechanical or subconscious will, is another problem of opposites in which she has produced astonishing results and aims always at higher marvels; for there her ultimate miracle would be an animal consciousness no longer seeking but possessed of Truth and Light, with the practical omnipotence which would result from the possession of a direct and perfected knowledge. Not only, then, is the upward impulse of man towards the accordance of yet higher opposites rational in itself, but it is the only logical completion of a rule and an effort that seem to be a fundamental method of Nature and the very sense of her universal strivings."¹

Here the self-assured, dignified expression is directed towards a logically developing exposition of a fairly elaborate nature based upon a profound truth of high seriousness. But the following paragraph, on the contrary, is an aphorism built round a more or less similar truth. We see how the style of expression is immediately changed to a different key:

"Love is the keynote, Joy is the music, Power is the strain, Knowledge is the performer, the infinite All is the composer and audience. We know only the preliminary discords which are as fierce as the harmony shall be great; but we shall arrive surely at the fugue of the divine Beatitudes."²

And it is the same masterly pen of complete self-confidence and perfect artistry which expresses itself in an entirely different tone and manner—the most unconventional and colloquial—even when as earnest and

1. *The Life Divine*, American Edition, pp. 4-5.

2. Sri Aurobindo: *Thoughts and Glimpses*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1950, p. 19.

profound as he always essentially is, in the following letter :
 "A mixture of scepticism and slogans, 'Hail Hitler' and the Fascist salute and the Five-Year Plan and beating of everybody into one amorphous shape, a disabused denial of all ideals on one side and on the other, a blind 'shut-my-eyes and shut-everybody's eyes' plunge into the bog in the hope of finding some firm foundation there, will not carry us far. And what else is there ? Until new spiritual values are discovered, no great enduring creation is possible."¹

4

Let us now turn to Sri Aurobindo's poetry which is no less impressive and considerable both in quantity and quality. The two volumes of *Collected Poems and Plays* (1942); *Poems, Past and Present*; *More Poems*; *Last Poems*, the recently published poetic plays and above all, the great and immense epic creation, *Savitri* constitute, roughly speaking, his creative poetic effort covering about sixty years. There are also translations from the original Greek, Sanskrit and Bengali, and quite a number of free adaptations. The bold experiment in classical hexameters in both the lyrical and narrative forms and, above all, in the Homeric epical mode, *Ilion* are no less striking and constitute an original technical contribution to English poetry. Both the bulk and variety of his poetic output are really astonishing.

He was hardly more than a boy when he wrote the poems included in *Songs to Myrtilla* (1895). In these early pieces as also in the narrative poems of the Baroda period—*Urvasie* and *Love and Death*—the reader comes across many beautiful lines and memorable phrases, such as the following :

A perfect face amid barbarian faces....(*Collected Poems and Plays* Vol. I, p. 9).

A broken prodigal from pleasure's mart....(*Ibid.*, p. 4).

Titanic on the old stupendous hills....(*Ibid.*, p. 53).

There are, on the other hand, sustained descriptions,—such as Ruru's descent into Patala (Hades), or Pururavas seeking out Urvasie amid the dreadful silences of the Himalayan peaks, where Sri Aurobindo already appears to be a master of the blank verse.

In *Urvasie* as well as in *Love and Death* indomitable

1. Sri Aurobindo : *On Yoga II: Tome I*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1958, p. 163.

love is presented as ultimately triumphing over Death in one way or the other. While Pururavas ascends to the higher regions and becomes an immortal person, forever united with Urvasie, Ruru assaults Hades in order to regain Priyamvada and willingly barter away half of his own life to live the other half with his beloved restored to life. Both the narratives belong to the *genre* of deathless Romance where the two pairs of lovers, Pururavas and Urvasie, and Ruru and Priyamvada have their being and the highest fulfilment of their life in love, pure and eternal. Both the pairs are examples of great lovers in literature, romance and legend. Yet Sri Aurobindo, whose conception of the highest destiny of one's life is different, seems to imply that the lovers have somehow failed, inasmuch as they have chosen to prefer the lesser realisation of personal felicity to the greater and higher destiny of world redemption and transformation.

Baji Prabhou, another narrative of this early period, is a poem of stirring patriotic action and war and this time the poetic language and rhythm are excellently modified to suit the sanguinary theme of the poem. Sri Aurobindo gives us not a moment's respite but keeps us engaged in the bloody conflict from the beginning to the end. The opening lines are a vivid descriptive evocation of the time-setting and mood of the whole incident :

A noon of Deccan with its tyrant glare
Oppressed the earth; the hills stood deep in haze,
And sweltering athirst the fields glared up
Longing for water . . .

(*Collected Poems and Plays*, I p. 89).

The 'tiger-throated' gorge is evoked arrestingly, and the vicissitudes of the encounter are described with an excruciating particularity. Indeed, as Dr. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar says :

"In Sri Aurobindo, Baji Prabhou has found a minstrel worthy of his imperishable sacrifice, a sacrifice that recalls that of Leonides at Thermopylae; and the poem written in vigorous blank verse and language charged with passion and power, movingly evokes the shifting scenes of the battle and elects itself to a place among the best heroic poems in the English language."¹

Sri Aurobindo's verse translations from the original

1. Iyengar's booklet, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

Sanskrit and Bengali are a class by themselves. Kalidasa's *Vikramorvasie* has become a blank verse-play entitled 'The Hero and the Nymph'; Bhartrihari's well-cut luminous stanzas have likewise become 'The Century of Life'; whole books from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have been rendered into easy English verse; the songs of Vidyapati, Chandidas and other Vaishnava poets have been given an appropriate English dress; numerous hymns from the Rig Veda have been sensitively rendered into English in *Hymns to the Mystic Fire* and C.R. Das's *Sagar-Sangeet* has been turned into *Songs from the Sea*, retaining much of the tumult, magic and music of the original Bengali.

It is often said that great poetry cannot be translated. While it is largely true and this may as well be admitted that neither Kalidasa's poetic rhythm, for example, nor his honey-sweet music, nor his verbal magic, nor the precise texture of his thought is quite reproduced in Sri Aurobindo's English version of his *Vikramorvasie*, it cannot be denied that the poetical essence of the original has been admirably rendered, and it is this which makes his *The Hero and the Nymph* genuine English dramatic poetry.

While reading his poetical translations one cannot but feel that like some of the distinguished English poet-translators such as Chapman, Pope, Fitzgerald and Laurence Binyon, Sri Aurobindo gives us as much of himself as of the original author and that in the ultimate analysis both the original writer and the translator get so felicitously and harmoniously identified in their personalities and self-expression that it becomes difficult to separate the one from the other. One such perfect literary success in the difficult art of translation is his *Songs from the Sea*. And "a like verbal mastery and metrical resilience" are to be found in his renderings from Bhartrihari, Vidyapati and Chandidas. The secret of his success as poet-translator is clearly indicated in the course of a letter in which he wrote that "a translator is not necessarily bound to the original he chooses; he can make his own poem out of it, if he likes, and that is what is generally done".¹

His poetic plays like *Perseus the Deliverer*, *Vasavadutta*, *Rodogune*, *The Viziers of Bassora*, *Eric*, *The Prince of Edur*²

1. Quoted in Dilip Kumar Roy's *Anami*, p. 245.

2. Except the first one all the rest were posthumously published.

point to another striking facet of his versatile poetic achievement. As Dr. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar appropriately remarks about them, "The blank verse is throughout Elizabethan in cast though with modern nuances of idiom, and the characterisation is on the whole firm and convincing. All...are steeped in poetry and romance, the plotting is competent, the characters are colourfully varied. *Vasavadutta* is Indian in its atmosphere, *The Viziers* takes us to Persia, *Perseus* and *Rodogune* to Syria, and *Eric* to Norway, but the actual geography is really of little consequence."¹ Indeed, what Sri Aurobindo wrote about the role of history and geography in *Perseus* applies with equal validity to the other plays as well :

"In a romantic work of imagination of this type these outrages on history do not matter. Time there is more than Einsteinian in its relativity, the creative imagination is its sole disposer and arranger; fantasy reigns sovereign; the names of ancient countries and peoples are brought in only as fringes of a decorative background; anachronisms romp in wherever they can get an easy admittance, ideas and associations from all climes and epochs mingle; myth, romance and realism make up a single whole. For there the stage is the human mind of all times...."²

Of all these plays, it may be safely said, it is *Perseus the Deliverer* which is the best and maturest for the simple reason that it alone received careful revision at his hands before publication. As Dr. Iyengar says about it, "The play is very satisfying as drama and as poetry, and also as an imaginative rendering of the ideas of evolution and progress."³ In the Prologue to the play, Pallas Athene significantly hurls her gauntlet on man's behalf before Poseidon :

Me the Omnipotent
Made from His being to lead and discipline
The immortal spirit of man, till he attain
To order and magnificent mastery
Of all his outward world....
I bid thee not,
O azure strong Poseidon, to abate
Thy savage tumults : rather his march oppose.
For through the shocks of difficulty and death

1. Iyengar's booklet, op. cit., p. 31.

2. *Collected Poems and Plays* II pp. 175-6.

3. Iyengar's booklet op. cit. p. 32.

Man shall attain his godhead.

(*Collected Poems and Plays I*, pp. 178-9).

For lack of space it is not possible here to deal with each one of his six plays separately in order to bring out fully Sri Aurobindo's dramatic genius which can be favourably compared with the Shakespearean as well as Kalidasian. And yet the basic substance and vision of things, particularly human life, is purely Aurobindonian and ever 'futurist' in tone and intention. Everywhere, the stress is laid on the great power of love. The character of Eric is typical of this stress. He, the elected King of Norway, is a man of Destiny. He has wisdom and power; he is sovereignly strong in peace as well as in war. But he aspires to know whether there is an even greater godhead behind wisdom and power, and as if in answer to his question he hears somebody singing:

Love is divine

Love is the hoop of the gods

Hearts to combine.

And this knowledge brings out a radical transformation in his character. Hatred gives place to love, ruthlessness dissolves into humanity and we feel convinced that:

Some day surely

The world too shall be saved from death by love . . .

(*Eric*, Act III, Sc. I)

It is, however, in his lyrical poems of philosophical-mystical experience and style that we find Sri Aurobindo at his characteristic and distinctive poetic peak. It is here that it is easy and natural for him to reveal his integral mystical view of man, Nature and God—a view which he had been able to develop and express even before he took to Yoga. Mystic experiences are ordinarily difficult to understand and analyse or describe. And yet the mystics cannot help attempting the impossible through the ages, both in the East and in the West, for there is often a creative pressure behind them to which the creative mystic-artist cannot fail to respond. In *Who*, for example, the tumbling anapaests manage to convey the idea of the One underlying the Many, the changeless Reality informing the everchanging world of our immediate experience:

In the sweep of the worlds, in the surge of the ages

Ineffable, mighty, majestic and pure,

Beyond the last pinnacle seized by the thinker

He is throned in His seats that for ever endure.

(*Collected Poems and Plays I*, p. 123).

The Rishi, The Birth of Sin, The Vedantin's Prayer, To the Sea, A Child's Imagination, The Rebirth etc.—his earlier spiritual lyrics—are unique mystical expressions in English poetry; there rhythm and phrase and experience fuse into an impressive poetic whole, and we are immediately reminded of the examples of such spiritual poetry as the *Upanishads* and the *Gita*.

His later lyrics of this kind such as *Ahana*, *Six Poems* (1941) and *Last Poems* (1952) have a greater maturity of both thought and expression. “Besides being a compact poetic guide-book to Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy of the Life Divine on earth”, says Dr. Iyengar, “*Ahana* is unique for another reason as well—it is written in rhymed hexameter. . . . Science and philosophy, introspection and interrogation, fact and myth and symbolism, hope, aspiration and ecstasy, all course through *Ahana’s* universe of melody. We cannot pause, we are carried along by the flood, for the dactyls and spondees and the closing trochees give this torrential philosophical poem almost a Niagara-like strength and headlong rapidity of motion. . . . Truly can *Ahana* be described as one long feast of music and revelation, the philosophy being subsumed in the poetry, the poetry crystallising as philosophy.”¹

Indeed, what is true of *Ahana* is true of his later mystical lyrics as a whole. They all constitute, in varied ways and ingredients, no doubt, a “feast of music and revelation”, where rhythm and form and phrase and sense coalesce perfectly to give us some distinct and unforgettable taste of what the true mystics have experienced as an utter and absolute harmony of the supreme Reality. Like *Ahana*, his *Rose of God* is an outstanding spiritual poem. As in Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, so also in Sri Aurobindo’s poetry the ‘Rose’ stands as “the supreme symbol of the essence and efflorescence of God”.² As Sri Aurobindo says in the poem, Bliss, Light, Life, Love and Power are the five essences that fuse to make up the perfection of God. These together bloom eternally as the Rose of God in Heaven, but Sri Aurobindo would have them “leap up in our heart of humanhood”, “live in the mind of our earthhood”, “ablaze in the will of the mortal”, and thereby “make earth the house of the Wonderful and life Beatitude’s Kiss”. The Rose must be made to bloom here and now on the earth, for how else

1. Iyengar’s booklet, op. cit., pp. 39-40.

2. Ibid., p. 43.

can we have the enactment of the divine life in our midst ?

Poems like *Ahana*, *Rose of God*, *The Bride of Fire*, *Thought the Paraclete* and several sonnets of the *Last Poems* cast an immediate spell upon us which is akin to the spell of the Vedic and Upanishadic *mantra*. And no wonder, for it is Sri Aurobindo's avowed aim as a poet to bring poetry close to the substance and form and music of the *mantra*. As a literary critic, too, as we shall see in some detail in one of the later chapters, it was his considered view that the future poetry—even in English, or particularly in English—will more and more approximate to the *mantra*, minimizing, as far as it can, “the operations of meddling middleman the intellect, the senses, even the imagination”¹ and effectuating in one swift unflinching step the miracle of communication from the poet to the reader. One cannot help saying, on reading these poems of Sri Aurobindo, that he has eminently succeeded in this unique poetic attempt in modern times, and actually demonstrated the truth of his own critical statement, as quoted before, that the voice of poetry “comes from a region above us, a plane of our being above and beyond our personal intelligence, a supermind which sees things in their inmost and largest truth by a spiritual identity and with a lustrous effulgency and rapture, and its native language is a revelatory, inspired, intuitive word, limpid or softly vibrant or densely packed with the glory of this ecstasy and lustre.” There can be no better definition of mantric poetry than this, and we may say that it is here that Sri Aurobindo reached the high water-mark of his achievement as a poet. M. Abbe Bremond might have said of them that these are the true specimens of poetry, pure and undefiled, aspiring “each by the mediation of its proper magic, words, notes, colours, lines” to “joint prayer”.² But this is not all.

The supreme culmination of this distinctive poetic achievement is reached only in *Savitri*, a noble example of what he has termed ‘overhead’ poetry.³ It is an epic which requires a whole book of criticism to itself. Suffice it to say here that it was, as Dr. Iyengar has rightly observed, Sri Aurobindo's “final stupendous

1. Iyengar's booklet, op. cit. p. 41.

2. Quoted by Garrod : *The Profession of Poetry*, 1924, p. 39.

3. For some detailed idea of ‘overhead’ poetry see the chapter on *The Planes of Poetic Inspiration*—pp. 334-352.

effort as a poet, as a philosopher and Yogi and not only as a poet; it is steeped in Vedic symbolism, it is Upanishadic, Valmikian and Kalidasian in the crystalline quality of its blank verse inspiration, and it is a philosophical poem and a cosmic epic recalling, alone among the great poems of the world, Dante's *Divina Commedia*.¹ Sri Aurobindo had worked at it for almost the whole of his life, like Goethe at his *Faust*. What is no less remarkable is that unlike any of the other epic poets he made recast after recast, not merely addition on addition. This he had to do because "his aim was primarily to lift the work to the highest and most comprehensive expression possible of spiritual realities within the scheme set up by him of character, incident and plot."² Sri Aurobindo has left to us several illuminating letters³ written to Mr. K.D. Sethna about this poem and it is with their help that we can get some real idea of his intention and method as well as of the kind of labour and inspiration that went into the making of it.

With its 23,813 lines it is an immensely long poem in the English language, nay in any European language, modern or ancient. Among the epics which can be compared with it in general poetic quality, only the *Shahnamah*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata* exceed it in length. Indeed, as K.D. Sethna says, "*Savitri* stands with the masterpieces of Valmiki and Vyasa in more than one respect. It has been conceived with something of the ancient Indian temperament which not only rejoiced in massive structures but took all human life and human thought in the spacious scope of its poetic creations and blended the workings of the hidden worlds of Gods and Titans and Demons with the activities of earth. A cosmic sweep is *Savitri's*..."⁴ It spans the earth and heaven, spreads itself over diverse occult worlds and the whole world-stair, and projects the drama of life, death and immortality on this cosmic stage.

Dr. Raymond F. Piper, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, Syracuse University pays a glowing tribute to "the master metaphysician, mystic and poet, Sri Aurobindo", when he says that in *Savitri* the latter has created

1. Iyengar's booklet, op. cit., pp. 46-47.

2. Vide K. D. Sethna's article on *Savitri* in *Mother India*, August 1954, p. 36.

3. Now they are all appended to the one-volume edition of *Savitri*, a Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education publication.

4. op. cit., p. 38.

“what is probably the greatest epic in the English language and the longest poem. . . . in any language of the modern world”. “I venture the judgment”, he continues to say, “that it is the most comprehensive, integrated, beautiful and perfect cosmic poem ever composed. It ranges symbolically from a primordial cosmic void, through earth’s darkness and struggles, to the highest realms of supramental spiritual existence, and illumines every important concern of man, through verse of unparalleled massiveness, magnificence, and metaphorical brilliance. . . . *Savitri* is perhaps the most powerful artistic work in the world for expanding man’s mind towards the Absolute.”¹

It is not possible here to give any concrete idea of the poem.² It has to be read in order to be felt. We may close this section by quoting the following observations of Dr. Iyengar :

“What is so striking about this epic is its sheer sweep, its amazing modernity, its pervasive mystic quality. Philosophy and mysticism can seldom be subsumed in poetry; but Dante achieved the impossible, and now Sri Aurobindo has repeated this feat of fusing mysticism, philosophy and poetry. Wide comprehension is the distinguishing mark of all epics, and in *Savitri* this comprehension is seen in its encyclopaedic grasp of the totality of human experience and knowledge, ranging from the intuitions of the Vedic Rishis to the scientific discoveries and inventions of our own day. The striking modernity of *Savitri* is thus a function of its acute awareness of the contemporary situation in the physical and biological sciences, in the fields of philosophy and psychology, and in the regions of human acts; but all is integrally related to the double-action of the poem so that, in the final accounting, *Savitri* is neither an overflow of tradition nor an eruption of ‘modernism’ but a recordation in poetic terms of the ends and means determining man’s and the earth’s ultimate destiny set in a truly cosmic background. It is too much to expect that an entire epic can be written at the white heat of poetic frenzy, but the ‘overhead’ inspiration is often enough—and for reasonably long spells—in such triumphant evidence that we shall be justified in hailing *Savitri* with its incandescent Light of knowledge, with its vast reserves of controlled energy

1. *The Hungry Eye*, De Vorss & Co., California, 1956, pp 131-32.

2. The curious reader is referred to A. B. Purani’s book; “*Savitri: An Approach and a Study*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1956.

and its superb rhythms of creative life as verily a total projection of the ultimate destiny of the human spirit and of the possibility of the Divine inhabiting man and the universe.”¹

5

Such, then, is the life of Sri Aurobindo and such are his works. Judged by any standard, it will be regarded as a great life of immensely crowded and varied activities, particularly academic, political and literary. No less great and inspiring is his teaching, particularly in an age of gloom and anxiety such as ours, as it lies so richly and powerfully spread over all his manifold writings both in prose and poetry. No wonder, then, if even such a great literary figure as Tagore, himself a veritable symbol of the Universal Man, was so profoundly stirred to the very depths of his being at the sight of the luminous personality of Sri Aurobindo as to speak out to him “loud and bold” :

“You have the Word and we are waiting to accept it from you. India will speak through your voice to the world, ‘Hearken to me’.”²

And the ‘Word’ was defined by Tagore thus :

“The Word is that which helps to bring forth towards manifestation the unmanifest immense in man. Nature urges animals to restrict their endeavour in earning their daily wages of living. It is the Word which has rescued man from that enclosure of a narrow livelihood to a wider freedom of life....

Time after time, man must discover new proofs to support the faith in his own greatness, the faith that gives him freedom in the Infinite. It is realised anew every time that we find a man whose soul is luminously seen through the translucent atmosphere of a perfect life. Not the one who has the strength of an intellect that reasons, a will that plans, an energy that works, but he whose life has become one with the Word, from whose being is breathed OM, the response of the everlasting yes.”³

It was such a one that Tagore found in Sri Aurobindo when he saw him in 1928. Years ago,—it was in 1907, to be precise—says Tagore, he had seen Sri Aurobindo

1. Iyengar's booklet, op. cit., pp. 52-53.

2. *The Modern Review*, Calcutta, July, 1928.

3. Ibid.,

“in the atmosphere of his earlier heroic youth”¹ and he had then sung to him, “Aurobindo, accept the salutation from Rabindranath.” When he next saw him in 1928 at Pondicherry, he found him “in a deeper atmosphere of a reticent richness of wisdom”² and he again could not help singing to him—only this time it was in reverential silence—“Aurobindo, accept the salutation from Rabindranath.”

Even earlier than Tagore, the great Indian nationalist leader and fighter and poet, C.R. Das had felt the force of the personality of Sri Aurobindo, hardly a Yogi and Rishi at that time, in such a way that he could not help giving up all his other professional work in order to defend Sri Aurobindo, an undertrial prisoner in the famous Alipore Bomb Case, and concluding his historic speech to the Judge and the Jury by saying:

“My appeal to you is this that long after this controversy will have ceased, long after he is dead and gone, he will be looked upon as the poet of patriotism, as the prophet of nationalism, and the lover of humanity. His words will be echoed and re-echoed, not only in India, but across distant seas and lands.”³

And when Sri K.M. Munshi, a former student of Sri Aurobindo at the Baroda College, had an interview with the sage at Pondicherry after an interval of several years in June 1950, he wrote in an article about the Master thus:

“A deep light of knowledge and wisdom shone in his eyes. The wide calm of the spirit appeared to have converted the whole personality into the radiant Presence of one who shines with the light of Consciousness...”⁴

But the tributes paid on different occasions by the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, his collaboratrix in the spiritual work of world-transformation, are the most revealing.

On March 30, 1914, she wrote after her first meeting with Sri Aurobindo:

“It matters not if there are hundreds of beings plunged in the densest ignorance. He whom we saw yesterday is on earth: His presence is enough to prove that a day will

1. Ibid.,

2. Ibid..

3. Quoted in *The Integral Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, edited by Chaudhuri and Spiegelberg, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1960, p. 329.

4. Quoted in *Mother India*, Pondicherry, January 1962, p. 27.

come when darkness shall be transformed into light, when Thy reign shall be indeed established upon earth."¹

After Sri Aurobindo's passing away on December 5, 1950, when his body was laid in Samadhi in a rose-wood box in the Ashram courtyard on December 9, 1950, the Mother had the following inscription engraved on the tomb :

"To Thee who hast been the material envelope of our Master, to Thee our infinite gratitude. Before Thee who hast done so much for us, who hast worked, struggled, suffered, hoped, endured so much, before Thee who hast willed all, attempted all, prepared, achieved all for us, before Thee we bow down and implore that we may never forget even for a moment all we owe to Thee."

This, one may say, is the best and most moving summing-up of Sri Aurobindo's whole life and work and personality.

In any case, the Mother has no doubt that "what Sri Aurobindo represents in the world's history is not a teaching, not even a revelation; it is a decisive action direct from the Supreme."²

If it is so - and let us hope the world will come to recognise it in due course -, we may feel justified in making a little modification in that immortal expression of Tagore about Sri Aurobindo : "You have the Word", and silently and reverentially say to him : "You are the Word".

In any case, the Aurobindonian 'Word' lies now delivered to us in all its opulence, amplitude and majestic beauty. It is meant for the whole of mankind and shines before us like the everlasting Sun. Also, to each one of us, whether big or small, learned or ignorant, free or enslaved, his 'Word' seems to speak with all the confidence and warmth of the voice of a personal love, a personal hope, a personal courage. While the transcendental and cosmic aspects of the Aurobindonian Voice are there, firmly and magnificently entrenched before us for our wholesale guidance and salvation, its personal 'accent' and intonation meant for each one of us, individually and personally, cannot be long missed.

For my own purpose here, I have chosen to catch

1. *The Mother : Prayers and Meditations*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, Enlarged Edition, 1948, p. 88.

2. *The Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, April, 1961 p. 69.

something of the voice of the literary critic as I found it getting intimate to me for some years. Whether I have been able to catch it properly and faithfully, it is not for me to decide. That I have tried my best to render it in his own powerfully expressive and rich, lucid language and to explore as many of its subtle meanings and connotations as I could, within the extremely limited range of my knowledge, will, I hope, become clear in the following pages.

However, his voice as a literary critic cannot be presented in any absolute void. This is why I had to present in the beginning this substantial, though necessarily brief, background of his varied and rich political, literary, philosophical and yogic life, and the magnificently sublime spiritual personality, full of the ripe wisdom and divinity of the ancient Rishis of this great country of ours as well as the intensities and urgencies of aspiration and life-force of the élite of Western modernism. The best of the elements of the hoary East and of the new ardent West hopefully united together make of his synthetic life and works an inspiring example and perfect model of the shape of things to come and the new human race to be born. His life was both a fulfilment of the greatest hopes and highest aspirations of modern man and a testament of what he is destined to realise in the not too distant future.

Viewed against the background of an epoch-making life of a man of his stature and attainments, his role as a literary critic is, I believe, bound to make a deeper impression upon our mind than otherwise. However, his work as a literary critic cannot be seen in complete isolation from his general life and other works and activities. Also, it was not merely his well-packed experience of literature alone, of its varied, intensive and extensive study as well as equally varied and massive practice, but the full and deep impact of the 'whole' man that he sought to be and ultimately did become, which he brought to bear upon his work of literary criticism. This is why, it should not become difficult for us to discover in this work of his mature literary sensibility and scholarship a significant and valuable signpost amidst the chaotic traffic of contemporary critical theories and practices both in England and in America, or, for the matter of that, in the East and in the West. Indeed, the existing chaos which we see around us seems to have so swept us off our moorings that it is no wonder if we find

even the distinguished critics of our times saying not only that poetry matters little to the modern world but that the very age of poetry is gone. And with regard to the modern art of criticism, it is being increasingly felt that for all its apparent brilliance, variety and richness, its ultimate purpose or aim is getting more and more obscured and lost. How can then the true literary activity of modern man make a real progress forward and, what is still more important, enable him to rise high up in the scale of culture, as it did in the ancient past ?

My humble claim in this book is that the speciality of Sri Aurobindo as a literary critic lies in the fact that he not only provides us with the eternal moorings of poetry and art but shows us, at the same time, in as precise and persuasive a language as possible, the truly new and progressive direction which our literature should and must take in order to enable us to usher in what he hopefully calls the bright noons of the future.

■ ■ ■

Chapter 3

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FUTURE POETRY AND LETTERS OF SRI AUROBINDO, THIRD SERIES

Quantitatively speaking, there are not more than half a dozen or so published volumes which constitute the bulk of Sri Aurobindo's literary criticism. There may be one or two volumes more which may come out, in due course, in the form of his talks or letters. Except for the 406-page *The Future Poetry* which came out during the years 1917-20 in the form of a long, serially-written essay in the philosophical monthly *The Arya* which was, strangely enough, mostly managed, edited and contributed by him alone on a quite large variety of subjects in the sequential form, nearly all his critical literary opinions and views are to be found mostly in the form of letters. Among the four volumes of his letters so far published, the third series is exclusively devoted to his views on poetry and literature. These two, therefore, constitute his principal books of literary criticism, although our knowledge of Sri Aurobindo as a literary critic will not be complete unless we take into account two other small volumes of letters entitled *Letters on 'Savitri'* and *Life, Literature, Yoga*.

The Future Poetry published in book-form in August, 1953 is, in my view, a work of as much importance in the field of literary criticism as *The Life Divine* is in the realm of philosophy, *The Synthesis of Yoga* in that of Yoga and *Savitri: a Legend and a Symbol* in that of poetry. *The Future Poetry*, though little known yet in the larger world, is not just an appendage to Sri Aurobindo's major works. As Dr. S. K. Ghosh rightly says, "It is itself a major work and in its own way quite as essential."¹ While I don't quite agree with him that *The Future Poetry* is "perhaps the one original contribution to the subject of aesthetics in our times"²—there being other original contributions such as Croce's *Aesthetics*, Ezra Pound's *Literary Essays*, Hulme's *Speculations*, I. A. Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism*, T. S. Eliot's *Selected Essays*, Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*, to name just

a few outstanding ones—, one may be justified in stating that Sri Aurobindo's book is the most outstanding and original of them all. It is, at any rate, the richest and most courageous possible synthesis of the critical genius of the East and that of the West. Sri Aurobindo, as we have already seen in the second chapter, was a profound scholar of the Western and Eastern literatures, both classical and modern. His mind and sensibility were already deeply steeped in the literary riches of the East and the West before he took to a long, sustained as well as intensely concentrated life of spiritual discipline and realisation which brought about a considerable lifting up of his consciousness and nature above the narrow racial or national or even purely human level. By the time, therefore, he came to write out the serials of *The Future Poetry*, he had developed the sense of 'tradition' and literary 'history' in a much fuller, richer and more cosmopolitan measure than T. S. Eliot had advocated in his famous critical essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. The whole of the Western literary tradition, beginning from Homer to W. B. Yeats, and of the Eastern literary heritage, ranging from the ancient Vedic and Upanishadic poet-seers to the modern mystic poet, Tagore, had been splendidly assimilated in his own creative and critical consciousness and was at his finger-tips for use in his literary criticism. It was, thus, a richly synthetic and compact critical mind having at its command a wide and intimate knowledge of the literatures of both India and Europe, and, at the same time, attaining a unique vision of a sublime order *sui generis* transcending the cultural genius of either, which he brought to bear on *The Future Poetry*. His spiritual attainment, too, made an illuminative and transformative impact upon his literary knowledge and insight and gave him both a universal and transcendental outlook on all the significant aspects and problems of poetry and art.

Again, it clearly and firmly tells us about the essence, as also the first and last aims of poetry. There is no confusion or contradiction anywhere about these essential aims and objectives of poetry. A critic of poetry gets a clear and consistent idea here as to the basic and ultimate purpose or function of poetry. What is more, with a similar clear-eyed vision which has almost the force of inevitability in it, he gives an indication of the direction in which poetry in the English tongue at least should and even must increasingly proceed in the years

to come.

As far as we in India are concerned, Sri Aurobindo's book carries a special value of its own, inasmuch as it is most probably the one book of English poetic criticism which seeks to look at poetry in general and the evolution of English poetry and at the outstanding English and American poets with unmistakably Indian eyes and from the Indian point of view. In spite of so many years of quite intensive as well as extensive study of the English language and literature in our country, and some of us even doing research on this or that aspect of it or this or that English author, it can hardly be said yet that we have been able to develop that precise particular sensibility and outlook which should enable us to cultivate a genuinely Indian approach and, consequently, Indian terminology to understand English poetry as an enlightened Indian should. Hitherto, we have been taught to see and study English poetry through the Englishman's and English critic's spectacles and that is why we have practically failed to make a truly original contribution to the study of English literature. One of the reasons for this has been, I believe, that we have been so much governed by the aping mentality that we have not yet had the courage to feel and draw sustenance from our own Indian roots. Instead of developing any living faith in our own 'Indianness' and thus turning to the contributions, say of Sanskrit aestheticians and literary critics for inspiration as well as knowledge of at least the literary principles, canons and terminology, we have but passively accepted the Western inspiration and knowledge, techniques and tools, and thus followed in the footsteps of Western theorists and critics, taking all poetic principles to emanate from Plato or Aristotle. And though it can certainly be said to our credit that some of us have succeeded in assimilating these Western influences into our own literary taste to the extent of giving a recognisably good account of ourselves both as creative and critical writers of English, it is doubtful whether we have yet been able to build anything English on Indian roots and values, drawing more and more upon a sound knowledge of the rich heritage of our Indian culture, including the literary culture, and applying our rediscoveries fruitfully to an alien language and literature. First of all, our knowledge itself of our own culture is quite vague and inadequate, and secondly, we have had this feeling implanted in us in course of all these years of

English education, that we need a knowledge of the Bible, of French and Greek and Latin writers, if not in their originals, at least in their translations, and a few years' stay in England at one of the British universities in order to acquire a good and sound knowledge of the English language and literature. While the truth behind this attitude is certainly not denied, the time has now come when we Indians should start asking ourselves whether all this is worthwhile and whether for all our best efforts so far, the Englishmen are yet prepared to recognise our claims to the ability to write poetry or even original literary criticism in English. Even such a sensible poet and critic as Kathleen Raine stated recently that she found a sense of remoteness and strangeness—that is to say, alienness in most Indo-Anglican poetry. In an article on *The Future Poetry* of Sri Aurobindo¹, Kathleen Raine, in course of her reference to Sri Aurobindo's evaluation of A.E.'s poetic language as "rendered sometimes a little remote and unseizable by its immergence in an unusual light", says: "This same remoteness English readers find in most Indian poetry written in English, even that of Tagore, where images, to the Western reader, make an impact only aesthetic, and fail to convey what doubtless their author intended. Doubtless Tagore's poems written in Bengali convey the total intelligible content of his thought, that is elusive in his English poems. The same failure of communication I find in the poems of Sri Aurobindo himself and, to a greater and less extent, in all the Indian poetry written in English known to me. (I do not of course speak of verse like that of the young poet Dom Moraes, who has adopted a Western point of view together with the English language, and whose work is essentially indistinguishable from that of his English contemporaries—whatever at some future time it may become)."² And just as the typical British writer is apt to find fault with our writing poetry in English, so it might be doubted whether he would feel quite pleased with our attempt at English literary criticism as well. He is apt to dislike our poetry in English because its thought and imagery are to him much too remote and alien, being more Indian than Western; and he is apt to criticise our English literary criticism because it is more Westernised and, therefore,

1. Published in the 15th number of *Sri Aurobindo Circle*, Bombay, 1959.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

imitative than Indian and original. He would like us to contribute an Indian interpretation of Shakespeare and Milton and Shelley rather than a more or less soulless reproduction, howsoever brilliant and lively on the surface, of what the Western critics have said on them. Not that all the Indian literary criticism in English is poor and merely derivative. The Indian temperament being by nature a quite catholic and easily and widely assimilative one, can achieve the qualities of brilliance and excellence even when it imitates something foreign to its own genius and life. But for all this the inescapable fact remains that our performance is sure to be much better and more enduring and appreciable if, instead of erecting something out of the merely imported and laboriously learnt materials from the West, we go back to the undying roots of our own luminous spiritual and literary cultures, and drawing not only inspiration and sustenance from them but also the technique and terminology, all of which has not yet become outworn and moribund, we produce something which is of the nature of a genuine synthesis of the old and the new, the Indian and the British. It is in this way more than any other that we are likely to make some truly original contribution of lasting value. And it is here that Sri Aurobindo's *The Future Poetry* occupies a special place of importance in the history of English literary criticism. It is, in my view, the one outstanding achievement of such a fruitfully synthetic critical mind and it points to a direction in which genuine works of literary criticism in English can be undertaken by truly enlightened Indians.

But when we speak of an Indian point of view in connection with *The Future Poetry*, it should be made clear that it is in no narrow sense that we do so. Indeed, the genius of Sri Aurobindo, whether spiritual or political or literary, was not the product of any particular geographical area, nor was it meant for any particular people or community. It was ever global and meant for the whole of mankind. Transcending the peculiarities of nationality and race and yet deeply instinct with what we know as Indian culture and vision and experience, his was a genius which was truly and widely cosmopolitan in the largest and subtlest sense of the term. Moreover, the very spirit of the Indian mind or genius is something so assimilative, broad-minded and human that it tends to become cosmopolitan without much difficulty. Sri Aurobindo's genius richly and freely par-

took of this catholic aspect of the Indian mentality and this fact subtly coloured and modified all he thought and wrote.

But there is a further importance of this critical literary contribution by Sri Aurobindo. It is, as has been stated before, not one of his side works written during any period or moments of leisure snatched from his main yogic or poetic activity, but a major work itself. That is to say, it is as good a channel of communication of his rich spiritual experience and teaching, in brief, his message, as *The Life Divine* or *Savitri* or *The Synthesis of Yoga*. It, thus, occupies a very important and distinctive position among his other works. It may be stated without any hesitation that in all his works Sri Aurobindo's chief concern is with the "vital question" of the future of man. It is in course of the examination and solution of this vital question that he reveals to us how the present mental consciousness of man can be exceeded and expanded, and inspired by a new synthetic vision of his future. And like *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga* and *The Human Cycle*, *The Future Poetry* is also concerned with this very fundamental problem of modern man. It is not merely a book about poetry, traditionally understood and treated as such, but a work where Sri Aurobindo really examines and expounds something of the *rationale* of that synthetic unitive vision which we find in his other major works. Only this vision is now sought to be perceived through the *rationale* of the inspired poetic word. Poetry is now virtually seen as one of the signposts and leaders of human evolution. The nature of his faith in man and his spiritual evolution almost demands a defence of poetry such as is to be found in *The Future Poetry*. Also, when we put it beside *Savitri*, it is clear to us that the two works are very closely, almost integrally connected. *Savitri*, it appears, is the very concrete embodiment of not only all the basic poetic principles enunciated in *The Future Poetry*, but the very poetry of the future visioned therein. The two works are like the legislative and executive aspects of the same living body politic, as it were; the soul and body of a single, though highly complex, creative activity or genius. And thus Sri Aurobindo succeeds in demonstrating without any shadow of a doubt that his theories of poetry are not just theories, i.e., mere ideas and visions in an unrealisable, insubstantial form, but living practical idealities realised by him in his monumental epic of about 24,000 lines of sustained poetic power and splendour.

This is something remarkable about Sri Aurobindo as a literary critic or aesthetician. Others like Croce, or Dr. I. A. Richards, or Dr. F. R. Leavis can mostly theorise and hardly poetise; practitioners like Hulme, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot can but partly and fragmentarily realise through actual verses all that they have theorised about poetry. On the contrary, the picture of poetry, as given by Sri Aurobindo both in theory and in practice is more total, comprehensive, forward-looking, vivid, real and convincing than any provided by these theorists and poet-critics. Shall one, on the basis of it, hazard the guess that Sri Aurobindo would like the literary critic or, for that matter, life-critic or yogic and philosophic thinker not only to theorise and speculate but also realise the ideas, conceptions and visions in actual practice and thus make them truly real and concretely practical and of solid enduring value and force? Indeed, we find that when Sri Aurobindo, with a new notion of Quantity proper to English, theorised about the possibility of the use of the classical hexameter in English poetry, he did not leave the matter there but pursued it to its logical conclusion and actually demonstrated through several verses, and one whole epical fragment of over 4,000 lines, namely *Ilion*, that the thing was more than possible and need not be regarded any longer as outlandish as it had been done after such experiments as those of Spenser, Sidney, Tennyson, Clough, Longfellow and Bridges before. Above all, Sri Aurobindo's whole life itself was a practical demonstration of the truths which he sought to reveal to us through words and writings. And it is this which, above everything else, gives so much of irresistible power and validity and originality to all that he said and wrote. He was not merely the author of *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga*, for he lived them every moment of his life; and so when he wrote of the future poetry of man, with particular reference to the English language, he actually lived every line of it not only as an aesthetician but as a poet too and poured out whole seas of it with such sonorous splendours and reverberations through his richly diverse varieties of songs, sonnets, lyrics, epics, poetic plays and narratives, that they continue to produce thrilling effects of the power and beauty of both an opulent, aesthetic and spiritual tradition and a magnificent, original 'individual talent'.

But the story of his remarkable originality as a literary critic does not end here. He has revealed to us the

relation of poetry to human life and human progress in a way, hardly seen and realised by others before or in the contemporary world. Here, too, he richly combines the powers of tradition and individuality and finally exceeds both. Nearly all the serious-minded critics of the East and the West have realised the vital role which poetry can play, and has played, and must be always made to play in human life and civilisation. But it is doubtful whether all of them have clearly and convincingly realised the power of poetry in human life, particularly the power of what Sri Aurobindo terms as 'mantric' poetry. By the way, we can see here, an example of a felicitous and original application of the Indian literary terminology to English poetic criticism, just as the Indian aesthetic term 'Rasa' can convey a whole world of meanings if applied with knowledge and discrimination to English literature and made a part of English literary criticism. To realise and evoke the power of 'mantric' poetry in human life is to lead it always from progress to progress, from one evolutionary step to another. It is to achieve a very living and uplifting linkage between ourselves and the Supreme Reality above and around us, to effectuate a happy marriage between matter and spirit, the word and the Word. No wonder, then, if Sri Aurobindo tries to impress upon us as gently and persuasively as only a yogic poet and critic can do, that the future of modern man is very closely linked with the future of his poetry. Poetry, properly understood, holds the key to the future. 'For', as Sri Aurobindo says, "the great poet interprets to man his present or reinterprets for him his past, but can also point him to his future."¹ Nay, in all the three aspects of time -- the present, the past and the future -- the great poet can also "reveal to him the face of the Eternal".² The poetry of "the intuitive reason, the intuitive senses, the intuitive delight-soul in us"³, which is bound to be written in the new intuitive age, dawning upon us, and finally rising "towards a still greater power of revelation nearer to the direct vision and work of the Overmind from which all creative inspiration comes",⁴ would really mean "putting the poetic spirit once more in the shining front of the powers and guides of the ever-progressing soul

1. *F. P.* pp. 285-86.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 286.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 291.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 291.

of humanity.”¹ It is poetry which will once again “lead in the journey like the Vedic Agni, the fiery giver of the word, *Yuvā Kavīḥ, priyo aṭithir amartyo mandrajihvo ṛtacit ṛtāvā*, the Youth, the Seer, the beloved and immortal Guest with his honied tongue of ecstasy, the Truth-conscious, the Truth-finder, born as a flame from earth and yet the heavenly messenger of the Immortals”.²

This naturally implies that if the poetry of man is one of the true reflections of the level of consciousness and culture he has attained at any period of time, it is also one of the unmistakable indicators of the level of consciousness and culture he is likely to attain in future.

As far as Sri Aurobindo is concerned, he has hardly any doubt about the truth of the fundamental power of poetry and its future. But like a true divine seer, he does not impose his vision of the future upon us. On the contrary, he speaks to us gently, detachedly and modestly, and at the same time leaves ample room for other, even contrary, points of view to state their case. As Dr. S. K. Ghosh rightly says, “The exposition is so full and varied and suggestive, so fair to other points of view and other possibilities that there is little left for the critic to add or to take away.”³ That is why, one would hardly feel like quarrelling with Sri Aurobindo when he says about the future of poetry :

“The issues of recent activity are still doubtful and it would be rash to make any confident prediction; but there is one possibility which...is at least interesting and may be fruitful to search and consider. That possibility is the discovery of a closer approximation to what we might call the *mantra* in poetry....Poetry in the past has done that in moments of supreme elevation; in the future there seems to be some chance of its making a more conscious aim and steadfast endeavour.”⁴

On the face of it, it would seem as if Sri Aurobindo were merely relying upon the experience of the past for visioning the future. But as our familiarity with his poetics grows and we are able to see clearly what he actually feels and thinks and sees about poetry, we cannot fail to perceive that his aesthetic observations are almost pro-

1. *F. P.* p. 292.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

3. *op. cit.*, p. 62.

4. *F. P.*, p. 11.

phetically original. Even the old truths about art and poetry are made new at his hands and we get almost a new theory of poetry; at any rate, it is very different from the ones we now hold. Or if the theory is not quite new, the manner of statement and application certainly is. What is this view of poetry like? The essence of poetry, its peculiar intensity, says Sri Aurobindo, "comes from the stress of the soul-vision behind the word; it is the spiritual excitement of a rhythmic voyage of self-discovery among the magic islands of form and name in these inner and outer worlds".¹ Also, "poetry and art are born mediators between the immaterial and the concrete, the spirit and the life. This mediation between the truth of the spirit and the truth of the life will be one of the chief functions of the poetry of the future".² "Today", Sri Aurobindo continues to say, "mankind satiated with the levels is turning its face once more towards the heights, and the poetic voices that will lead us thither with song will be among the high seer voices."³ If it is a fact—as Sri Aurobindo believes and says that it is—that behind the surface of the present crisis, the human intelligence "seems on the verge of an attempt to rise through the intellectual into an intuitive mentality"⁴, then the aesthetic mind, "whether it takes form in the word of the poet or in the word of the illumined thinker, the prophet or the seer, can be one of the main gateways".⁵ And since what the age will aim at will be a "harmonious and luminous totality of man's being", therefore, "to this poetry the whole field of existence will be open for its subject, God and Nature and man and all the worlds, the field of the finite and the infinite. It is not a close, even a high close and ending in this or any field that the future offers to us, but a new and higher evolution, a second and greater birth of all man's powers and his being and action and creation".⁶

It is quite evident even from these brief statements how different, or, at least, differently worded is this view of poetry from some of the contemporary Western theories

1. *F. P.*, p. 22.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

6. *Ibid.*, 278.

of poetry¹, and how very robust and luminous is his faith in the future of poetry and man, despite the facts to the contrary. The basic difference lies in the very attitude to poetry which, for Sri Aurobindo, constitutes not only the fullest breath of life and one of the highest powers of truth, but one of the best levers of ascension and progress to "a new and higher evolution, a second and greater birth of all man's powers and his being and action and creation". He does not look upon poetry merely as a product of the surplus creative energy of man, howsoever sweet and beautiful and delightful, or some kind of an elevated superior pastime² and an exercise of the aesthetic and imaginative powers of man, howsoever rich and brilliant; but as a direct and concentrated expression

1. Quite a fair idea of such theories can be had from the following :

"I know that poetry is indispensable, but I do not know for what."—Jean Cocteau (*The World of Poetry*, compiled and edited by Clive Samson, Phoenix House, London, Reprinted 1961, p. 1).

"Poetry cannot cure cancer, nor put an end to fire, famine and flood. But it can provide a fusion of revelation and excitement without the penalties attaching to either. To a greater degree than the other arts, it can reveal the conditions of living. This should help us to amend them."—Babette Deutsch : *Poetry in our Times* 1956, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 2.

"The poetry of a people takes its life from the people's speech and in turn gives life to it; and represents its highest point of consciousness, its greatest power and its most delicate sensibility."—T. S. Eliot: Introduction to *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* 1933, p. 15.

"Art is valuable not because it is educational... not because it is recreative... not because everyone enjoys it (for everyone does not), not even because it has to do with beauty. It is valuable because it has to do with order, and creates little worlds of its own, possessing internal harmony in the bosom of this disordered planet. It is needed at once and now..."—E. M. Forster: 'The Challenge of Our Time' in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, 1946.

"Poetry matters little to the modern world. That is, very little of contemporary intelligence concerns itself with poetry."—F. R. Leavis: *New Bearings in English Poetry*, Chatto & Windus, London 1942 p. 5.

"The real difficulty is that as we no longer have the imagination to write poetry, we lack even the imagination to read it. The age of poetry is gone."—Prescott: *The Poetic Mind*.

2. Vide, for example, T. S. Eliot's conception of poetry in the Preface to the 1928 Edition of *The Sacred Wood* :

"Poetry is a superior amusement: I do not mean an amusement for superior people. I call it an amusement, an amusement *pour distraire les honnêtes gens*, not because that it is a true definition, but because if you call it anything else you are likely to call it something still more false." (pp. viii-x)

and communication of the Divine Truth and Beauty and Delight to the responsive human spirit. In this respect he is obviously more closely linked with some of the ancient Greek and Latin poets and critics as well as such Romantic English poets and critics as Blake and Shelley, for example, than the moderns and yet he goes some steps further than all of them. For, like the ancient Vedic and Upanishadic seers, he identifies the poetic activity of man with nothing less than his highest spiritual aspiration and consciousness, and seeks to embrace in poetry, like the integral Rishi of his futurist vision, all life and all being and all the action of the deeply as well as widely awakened modern spiritual man, thereby making it a living concrete symbol of his highest intuition or aspiration which, more than anything else, is to bring about a happy and subtle fusion of the truth and splendour of the Spirit with the truth and splendour of Matter in actual life, individual as well as collective.

A note of caution, however, needs to be given here, for when we think of poetry as an expression of the highest spiritual consciousness of man, it is necessary that we should have the right understanding of what is meant by spirituality. At least, let us try to understand what Sri Aurobindo himself means by it on the basis of his own spiritual experience and realisation as well as his study of the Scriptures of ancient India. "Spirituality", he says, "has meant hitherto a recognition of something greater than mind and life, the aspiration to a consciousness pure, great, divine, beyond our normal mental and vital nature, a surge and rising of the soul in man out of the littleness and bondage of our lower parts towards a greater thing secret within him."¹ Ordinarily we use this term rather vaguely and interpret it variously to include at times intellectual idealism, ethical effort, even social service. In the popular mind it is also taken to be that which is concerned with the world of vital spirits or the practice of occult mysterious rites to attain some special powers over nature and man, generally of a low vital kind. Sri Aurobindo, therefore, rightly warns us against such a superficial understanding of the subject and says :

"It must therefore be emphasised that spirituality is not a high intellectuality, not idealism, not an ethical turn of mind or moral purity and austerity, not religiosity or an ardent and exalted emotional fervour, not even a compound

1. *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, American Edition, 1953, pp. 74-75.

of all these excellent things; a mental belief, creed or faith, an emotional aspiration, a regulation of conduct according to a religious or ethical formula are not spiritual achievement and experience. These things are of considerable value to mind and life; they are of value to the spiritual evolution itself as preparatory movements disciplining, purifying or giving a suitable form to the nature; but they still belong to the mental evolution,—the beginning of a spiritual realisation, experience, change is not yet there. Spirituality is in its essence an awakening to the inner reality of our being, to a spirit, self, soul which is other than our mind, life and body. An inner aspiration to know, to feel, to be that, to enter into contact with the greater Reality beyond and pervading the universe which inhabits also our own being, to be in communion with It and union with It, and a turning, a conversion, a transformation of our whole being as a result of the aspiration, the contact, the union, a growth or waking into—a new becoming or new being, a new self, a new nature.”¹

Since poetry is essentially, though in varying forms and measures, the result of something like “an awakening to the inner reality of our being”, it has always in it the potentiality of true spirituality at its core. At times, particularly during the period of Romantic movement in literary history, it also succeeds, again in varying forms and degrees, in entering into something like a “contact with the greater Reality beyond and pervading the universe, which inhabits also our own being”. But it does not become poetry of true spiritual consciousness and experience until the poet concerned is awakened to the reality of a “spirit, self, soul, which is other than our mind, life and body”, and on the basis of this awakening is able to enter into contact with the supreme Divine Reality beyond, which both inhabits our own being and pervades the universe. And increasingly and ultimately he is so much in ‘communion’ and ‘union’ with ‘It’ that there takes place “a turning, a conversion, a transformation of (his) whole being as a result of the aspiration, the contact, the union”, till he not only awakens to but actually grows into “a new being, a new self, a new nature.”

It is in this radical, integral sense of a wholesale spiritual awakening and transformation and growth that

1. *The Life Divine*, American Edition, p. 763.

Sri Aurobindo thinks of the poetry of the future which awaits to be written by the poet-seer of the new age. It is only by such a wholesale revolutionary change in the poetic activity of man that he will be able to bring about the beautiful harmonious fusion of the truth and splendour of the Spirit with the truth and splendour of the Matter, of the human word with the Divine Word which is essential for the utterance of the *mantra* through the human medium – the *mantra* which, it seems, was the first high and sublime utterance of the poet and is going to be also his last highest speech.

We shall deal with this spiritual aspect of poetry in detail in the following two chapters.

In the meantime, let us turn to Sri Aurobindo's letters on poetry and literature as they are to be chiefly found in the book entitled *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Third Series.

This series of letters constitutes the replies which Sri Aurobindo gave to the questions put to him by some of his poet-disciples on poetry and literature. Naturally, the volume is not intended to give us "any systematic and exhaustive treatment of the subject", as *The Future Poetry*, to a very large extent, does. But the letters contain some of his illuminating views on the main issues relating to the creation and appreciation of poetry and literature and reveal Sri Aurobindo as "a literary critic of exceptionally fine discernment and unfailing judgment".¹ Though "a very large corpus of this writing relates to a critical examination and appraisement of particular lines or phrases of poems of his poet-disciples",² yet the compiler and editor of this volume has so arranged and grouped these letters under clear-cut headings and separate sections, after omitting all that is 'particular' or purely personal and including only those portions of Sri Aurobindo's comments and explanatory remarks which "discuss poetry or literature in a general way",³ that we get here "as complete a picture as possible of Sri Aurobindo's views on the main issues in the field of literary creation and appreciation".⁴ Thus such general but vital questions as "the inspiration and vision, the form or technique or the style and substance of poetry"⁵

1. *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Third Series, *Foreword*, p. iii.

2. *Ibid.*, p. iv.

3. *Ibid.*, p. iv.

4. *Ibid.*, p. iv.

5. *Ibid.*, p. iv.

are illuminatingly and variously examined and answered here. These letters, therefore, may be fittingly looked upon as a kind of supplement to what Sri Aurobindo had already said about these general questions in *The Future Poetry* several years before. The two books, taken together, amply enrich and reinforce Sri Aurobindo's poetics.

Another importance of these letters of literary criticism lies in the fact – indeed, it is implied in the very nature of the work undertaken by him here, i.e., the work of making comments or passing explanatory remarks on the poetical compositions submitted to him for correction as well as on general allied questions put to him for solution and enlightenment – that these are of immense practical value, inasmuch as “the illuminating advice which Sri Aurobindo gave to his few poet-disciples may also prove helpful to others who have a true impulse of literary creation and are in need of sure guidance to direct it on right lines”.¹ As the compiler and editor of the volume says, these letters “will prove of special help to those who are attempting to write spiritual and mystical poetry, for here Sri Aurobindo is not only a supreme Master himself but also a leader and guide to all who wish to explore the endless vistas of the Infinite Spiritual Muse”.²

But above all, this volume of letters should occupy a specially important place in general literary criticism since here for the first time Sri Aurobindo gives us an insight into the various sources of poetic inspiration and vision. Besides telling us something new and revealing about the subtle distinctions between poetry written from what he calls “poetic intelligence” and that from “Higher Mind” or between poetry of the “inner mind” and that of “dynamic vision” or between mystic and spiritual poetry or between poetry written from what he calls “the psychic inspiration” and that from “overhead inspiration”, he gives us a fairly detailed account of what he has so felicitously and compendiously termed “the Overmind aesthesis”. This long letter on an entirely new subject also appears at the end in *Letters on “Savitri”*, which was published two years later. It embodies a sound and sustained rationale of the Overmind inspiration or aesthesis which alone, according to

1. *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, 3rd Series, pp. iv-v.

2. *Ibid.*, p. v.

him, can bring about the poetry of the *mantric* power and beauty or what he also calls "overmental" poetry, i.e. the kind of poetry which he has himself given on a sublimely sustained level and a large scale in his epical work *Savitri*. As the importance of the *mantra* has been deeply and constantly emphasised in *The Future Poetry* particularly with reference to the poetry which is likely to be written in future, this section of *Letters*, 3rd Series enables us to supplement our knowledge of the subject we get in the former and to form a better, fuller and richer understanding of the inspirational source and distinctive features of the *mantric* utterance in poetry. I have referred to this letter in some detail in the chapter on poetic inspiration.

Last but not the least, the sections on the art of translation of poetry and on Indo-English poetry as also on contemporary English poetry and Surrealist poetry also bear the unmistakable stamp of Sri Aurobindo's subtle, luminous and original critical genius, and our own critical awareness of these subjects gets unusually lifted and enriched. Then, again, the sharply penetrating insights into the essential genius of Wordsworth, Blake, Lawrence, Yeats, Baudelaire, Shaw and Russell in the closing section of the book are some of the shrewdest pieces of critical evaluation which only a critic of high intellectual calibre and fine intuitive discernment can give us with such masterly ease, beauty and power in a memorable minimum language.

■ ■ ■

Chapter 4

“THE TRUE CREATOR, THE TRUE HEARER IS- THE SOUL”

Sri Aurobindo was a Yogi and a spiritual philosopher who composed, as stated before, nearly all his writings from a silent mind. But, surprisingly enough, he never gives us the impression that his mind had lost, as a result of the Yogic silence, the sharpness and point of critical intelligence or the logical consistency of persuasive reasoning. This is one of the reasons why in his two principal books of poetic criticism - *The Future Poetry* and *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Third Series we have numerous, subtle and, what, for lack of a more appropriate term, may be called spiritual references to what poetry is or what a poet is and what are his aims and functions; and yet they are all bound together by a harmonious consistency of thought and argument which is most satisfying and convincing even by logical, rational standards. A mere collection of these references at one particular place will constitute a well-ordered and harmonious world of poetry which he seeks to reveal to our vision.

Yet he is quite conscious from the first of the futility of making any attempt at a clear, precise definition of poetry. Indeed, a poet as he himself was, he knew from his own experience how “vain” an “effort” it would be to “labour to define anything so profound, elusive and indefinable as the breath of poetic creation”.¹ And to all those logical positivists and scientific intellectual reasoners who have made it a habit to proceed on any exposition of a matter or subject even if it be the subject of the fine arts or fine human emotions through clear-cut, precise definitions and close analysis of them, he would like to suggest with gentle firmness that “to take the myriad - stringed harp of Saraswati to pieces for the purpose of scientific analysis must always be a narrow and rather barren amusement”.² But this certainly does not dispense with the need, on our part, “of some guiding intuitions, some helpful descriptions which will

1. *F.P.*, p. 12.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

serve to enlighten our search".¹ In fact, such an undertaking, if taken up with a view to fixing "in that way, not by definition, but by description, the essential things in poetry"², will prove to be "neither an impossible nor an unprofitable endeavour."³

It is, thus, with a certitude inevitably born of such an attitude that he seeks to enlighten us in numerous ways on that "profound, elusive and indefinable thing which "the breath of poetic creation" is.

The following four passages put forward his basic and all-dominant point of view admirably enough.

1. "A soul expressing the eternal spirit of Truth and Beauty through some of the infinite variations of beauty, with the word for its instrument, that is, after all, what the poet is, and it is to a similar soul in us seeking the same spirit and responding to it that he makes his appeal."⁴
2. "To the ordinary mind, judging poetry without really entering into it, it looks as if it were nothing more than an aesthetic pleasure of the imagination, the intellect and the ear, a sort of elevated pastime....Pleasure, certainly, we expect from poetry as from all art; but the external sensible and even the inner imaginative pleasure are only first elements; refined in order to meet the highest requirements of the intelligence, the imagination and the ear, they have to be still further heightened and in their nature raised beyond even their own noblest levels.
 "For neither the intelligence, the imagination nor the ear are the true recipients of the poetic delight, even as they are not its true creators; they are only its channels and instruments; the true creator, the true hearer is the soul."⁵
3. "To us poetry is a revel of intellect and fancy, imagination, a plaything and a caterer for our amusement, our entertainer, the nautch girl of the mind. But to the men of old the poet was a seer, a revealer of hidden truths, imagination, no dancing courtesan but a priestess in God's house commissioned not to spin fictions but to image difficult and hidden truths; even the metaphor or simile in the Vedic style is used with a serious purpose and expected to convey a reality, not suggest a pleasing artifice of thought. The image was to these seers a revelative symbol of the unrevealed and it was used because it would

1. Ibid., p. 12.

2. Ibid., p. 12.

3. Ibid., p. 12.

4. Ibid., p. 54.

5. Ibid., pp. 12-13.

hint luminously to the mind what the precise intellectual word, apt only for logical or practical thought or to express the physical and the superficial, could not at all hope to manifest.”¹

4. “A poet or artist may be merely a medium for a creative Force which uses him as a channel and is concerned only with expression in art and not with man’s personality or his inner or outer life. Or, man being a multiple personality, a crowd of personalities which are tangled up on the surface but separate within, the poet or artist in him may be only one of these many personalities and concerned only with its inner and creative function; its work done, it may retire and leave the man to the others. It may or may not use the experiences of the others as materials for its work.... In fact it is a mixture of the two things that creates the poet. He is a medium for the creative Force which acts through him; it uses or picks up anything stored up in his mind from his inner life or his memories or impressions of outer life and things, anything it can or cares to make use of and this it moulds and turns to its purpose. But still it is through the poet-personality in him that it works and this poet-personality may be either a mere reed through which the Spirit blows but laid aside after the tune is over, or, it may be an active power having some say even in the surface mental composition and vital and physical activities to the total composite creature. In that general possibility there is room for a hundred degrees and variations and no rule can be laid down that covers all cases.”²

We see here that the stress, in one way or the other, is invariably on the soul, the subtle inner psychic being of the poet ever open to the hidden, unrevealed beauty or truth of things or ‘the eternal spirit of Truth and Beauty’ which is a creative force and might use him as its own medium of artistic expression. This is why, the truly creative personality of the poet cannot be, according to Sri Aurobindo, a mere mental or vital or even imaginative aesthetic being. To our ordinary conception, of course, he may be such a being, and the vital, mental or imaginative aesthesis may serve the ordinary purposes of art and life. Indeed, from the study of some of the well-known theories of poetry one gets the impression that the poet is not usually taken to

1. *The Human Cycle*, American Edition, Sri Aurobindo Library, New York, 1950, p. 8.

2. *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Third Series, pp. 53-54.

be a person who is more than an artist of words, i.e., the aesthetic being who takes an unusual delight in constructing beautiful objects and ideas through a skilful arrangement of words. Or, he is looked upon as a man endowed with unusual vital sensitivity and powers of imagination with whose help he creates a work of beauty and joy through a skilful portraiture of human feelings and thoughts, or "a criticism of life", as Arnold puts it.

It will not be unprofitable here to recall some of these well-known views on poetry. Turning, first, to some of the famous names in classical Sanskrit literary criticism, we find that according to Bharata's *Natyasastra* (Chap. XVI Verse 118), "good poetry is that which is composed of delicate and beautiful words and is easy to understand....and in which various *Rasas* have been depicted...."¹ To Bhamaha "the word and sense taken together are poetry"²; to Dandi "the body of poetry consists in well-arranged words expressive of the intended sense"³; to Vamana "poetry is to be liked because of its embellishments" and "style is the soul of poetry"⁴; to Mammata "poetry consists in word and sense—without faults and with excellences—which may at times be without figures of speech"⁵; to Visvanatha "a sentence full of *Rasa* is poetry"⁶; and to Jagannatha "a word denoting a beautiful sense is poetry".⁷ While it cannot be denied that most of these critical statements or definitions of poetry lose much of their aptness, beauty and manifold richness of meaning, when taken out and isolated from their contexts, we shall not be considered as quite unfair or wrong if we say that to both the early and later Sanskrit aestheticians poetry is at best considered to be an art whose important function is to provide what they call *Rasa* or *Rasas* whose number and typical characteristics they had more or less fixed in poetry. True, critics like Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta went a little farther than the rest and refused to take poetry to be merely a significant art and craft of

1. Quoted with English translation in *Psychological Studies in 'Rasa'* by Rākesa-gupta, February 1950, p. 10.

2. Ibid., p. 11.

3. Ibid., p. 11.

4. Ibid., p. 11.

5. Ibid., pp. 12-13.

6. Ibid., pp. 13-14.

7. Ibid., p. 14.

words. They tried to discover what they called the soul of poetry and found it in what they termed *Dhwani* or suggestion, and so they came out with the theory that "suggestion is the soul of poetry".¹ Also by *Rasa*, they did not merely mean the *Rasa* of the senses or emotion and sentiment and even imagination, but something deeper which comes quite close to the *Rasa* of the soul. But it is doubtful whether by soul they always understood and meant, both in poetic theory and practice, that inner or higher reality of our being which is spontaneously turned towards the higher reality of the Self or the Divine. As far as the general aesthetic position of the majority of Sanskrit poeticians is concerned, it may be, thus, safely taken that D.T. Tatacārya Śiromani sums it up in his definition of poetry or Kavya quite well when he says that "word and sense which directly aim at, and produce, pleasure are poetry."² And by 'pleasure' they usually understand the vital-emotional or imaginative, or intellectual pleasure, i.e. pleasure which is at least aesthetic in nature and is felt by every artist when he has performed his task of constructing something pleasing and beautiful by means of his materials. There is little mention, except in the case of Abhinavagupta and Viswanātha on occasions, of the deeper pleasure of the soul, i.e., of the deeply conscious part of man's being which is by nature ever open to the hidden spirit of Truth and Beauty, the Divine Spirit, in fact.

The Western theorists and critics of poetry, too, follow more or less the same lines. According to Aristotle, poetry is but an art of imitation through the media of rhythm and language and it is imitation which affords one the greatest aesthetic pleasure. Following the classical precedents, Sir Philip Sidney also regards poetry as "an art of imitation... a speaking picture with this end to teach and delight...".³ To Milton, poetry is an art of composition which is "more simple, sensuous and passionate" than rhetoric.⁴ For Dryden delight is "the chief, if not the only end of poetry; instruction can be admitted but in the second place, for poesy only instructs as it delights".⁵ In all these cases we see that

1. Ibid., p. 12.

2. Ibid., p. 14.

3. Ibid., p. 14.

4. *Of Education*, 1644.

5. *Rakesagupta*, op. cit., p. 15.

the emphasis is more or less on the 'artistry' in poetry. And as to the pleasure-aspect of the poetic composition, it is no doubt clearly emphasised that it should be there, but the specific nature of it does not appear to be carried beyond the 'aesthetic' level. Dr. Johnson sums up the 18th century point of view well enough when he says: "Poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the help of reason".¹ Here, no doubt, both the pleasure-principle and the truth-principle of poetry are clearly stressed but these are traced to 'reason' supported by imagination. Poetry is, thus, made an activity of the intellect, and it is doubtful whether the deeper spirit of man is called upon to participate in it. Wordsworth and Shelley may be cited as representatives of the typical Romantic theory of poetry, which certainly marks an advance upon the so-called classical theory by going beyond the surface reality of poetry and the concept of "rules" dominating it. As is well-known, to the former, poetry "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". It no doubt takes its "origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity", but while the emotion is being "contemplated", "by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind".² But whether this Wordsworthian contemplation of the original emotion leads one to the plane beyond the vital or vital-mental is doubtful. Again, while pointing out: 'What is meant by the word Poet? What is a Poet?' he says that a poet is but "a man speaking to men". No doubt, the poet, according to him, is "a man ...endowed with more lively sensibility...who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and (what is more) a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind".³ But it is doubtful whether the Wordsworthian conception of the poetic soul here is truly spiritual. One has the feeling that this too is a vital-mental conception like his contemplation of the poetic emotion. For Shelley, poetry "is ever accompanied with pleasure" and is usually "the expression of the imagination",⁴ but

1. Ibid., p. 14.

2. *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, 2nd Edition.

3. Ibid.

4. Rakesagupta, op. cit., p. 15.

whether by 'pleasure' or 'imagination' he always means something of a truly spiritual activity or experience is doubtful. Hazlitt, it appears, only echoes them when he calls poetry "the language of the imagination and the passions".¹ The typical Romantic critical standard for poets is well expressed by Leigh Hunt, who, like Shelley, calls poetry "imaginative passion". He says, "Imagination teeming with action and character, makes the greatest poets; feelings and thought the next; fancy (by itself) the next; wit the last. Thought by itself makes no poet at all."² Thus we find that imagination, fancy, feeling, even wit have all a place in poetry but there is no reference to that spiritual aspect of our being which is deeper than all these. Even Coleridge, the greatest of the Romantic critics, about whom I shall have occasion to say in some detail later on, is usually credited with thinking about poetry as a work of art - "the best words in the best order". For Edgar Allan Poe, "music, when combined with a pleasurable idea, is poetry", which, thus, remains mostly an aesthetic affair. Arnold is famous for calling poetry "a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty".³ But neither his conception of life nor that of truth and beauty is spiritual. It is at best moral and aesthetic. To Ruskin poetry is "the suggestion, by the imagination, of noble grounds for the noble emotions"⁴ and, therefore, something of an aesthetic-moral and vital-imaginative activity of man.

A sampling of the modern definitions of poetry tells, more or less, the same tale. To Hardy, "poetry is emotion put into measure"⁵; to T.S. Eliot it is "perfection of form united with a significance of feeling".⁶ At another place, as already seen, he calls it "a superior amusement".⁷ To W.H. Auden it is "memorable speech".⁸ Louis MacNeice takes it to be "a precision instrument for recording a man's reactions to

1. Ibid., p. 8.

2. Ibid., p. 17.

3. Ibid., p. 18.

4. Ibid., p. 19.

5. Quoted in *The World of Poetry*, compiled by Clive Samson, Phoenix House, London, 1960, p. 6.

6. Ibid., p. 6.

7. Preface to the 1928 edition of the *Sacred Wood*, p. viii.

8. Clive Samson, op. cit., p. 6.

life".¹ Christopher Fry thinks it as "the language in which man explores his own amazement",² but whether the exploration of the amazement is emotional, imaginative or spiritual is not made explicit. Though C. Day Lewis does not follow the beaten path of poetic definitions when he says that "Poetry is... a way of using words to say things which could not possibly be said in any other way, things which in a sense do not *exist* till they are born (or reborn) in poetry",³ yet even his view lays most stress on the artistry and craft in poetry without any clear hints of what is psychologically profound or truly spiritual. But Stephen Spender certainly strikes out a new and fruitful line of approach when he declares that "Poetry... is the attempt to imagine, in terms of the transitory forms of the present in which a generation lives, the universal nature of man's being".⁴ Here, one feels, Spender has a deeper and even a more intuitive awareness of the poetic activity and function than is the case with his contemporaries.

It is not that Sri Aurobindo is indifferent to the importance of craftsmanship or artistry in poetry or would consider that theory of poetry which lays most stress on its technique as erroneous. On the contrary, he ever believed in a close cooperation between conscious technical endeavour and the subtle action of creative inspiration working from some occult source, as is evident from the following:

"The search for technique is simply the search for the best and most appropriate form for expressing what has to be said, and once it is found, the inspiration can flow quite naturally and fluently into it. There can be no harm, therefore, in close attention to technique so long as there is no inattention to substance."⁵

Nor does he repudiate these well-accepted and, at best, traditional conceptions of poetry, as they have been coming down to us both in the East and in the West all these centuries. On the contrary, he is just and practical enough to concede that poetry does not necessarily originate only from the spiritual source of our being. On the contrary, the originating source of poetry "may

1. Ibid., p. 6.

2. Ibid., p. 7.

3. Ibid., p. 7.

4. Ibid., p. 7.

5. *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, 3rd Series, p. 163.

be anywhere, the subtle-physical plane, the higher or lower vital itself, the dynamic or creative intelligence, the plane of dynamic vision, the psychic, the illumined mind. . . ."¹ Also, he knew that "all poetry is mental or vital or both, sometimes with a psychic tinge"², and that "the power from above the mind comes in only in rare lines and passages lifting up the mental and vital inspiration towards its own light and power".³

It is his sense of justice and practical realism, again, which makes him explore and clearly distinguish the different levels and kinds of imagination which operate in poetry and the corresponding variations of pleasure which poetic activity provides. If it is accepted, as is usually done by the Romantic critics, that poetry appeals primarily to the imagination, we should be prepared to accept as well that this faculty of imagination can be used in different ways and for different purposes simply because it operates on the different levels of our consciousness. Naturally, this gives rise to different kinds of imagination. Sri Aurobindo classifies it at first under four broad heads:

"the objective imagination which visualises strongly the outward aspects of life and things; the subjective imagination which visualises strongly the mental and emotional impressions they have the power to start in the mind; the imagination which deals in the play of mental fictions and to which we give the name of poetic fancy; the aesthetic imagination which delights in the beauty of words and images for their own sake and sees no farther."⁴

But for Sri Aurobindo who likes poetry to aim still higher in order to draw upon the higher reaches or domains of human consciousness as well as to delve deep into the hidden spirit of things and oneself, all these four kinds of imagination with which literary criticism has so far made us familiar "only give the poet his materials, they are only the first instruments in the creation of poetic style".⁵ The fact is that the "essential poetic imagination does not stop short with even the most subtle reproductions of things external or internal, with the richest or most delicate play of fancy or with the most

1. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

4. *F.P.*, pp. 33-34.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

beautiful colouring of words or image.”¹ On the contrary, “it is creative, not of either the actual or the fictitious, but of the more and most real; it sees the spiritual truth of things . . . which may take either the actual or ideal for its starting-point”.² And even of this spiritual truth of things there are various gradations corresponding to the various planes, as we shall see in some detail in a later chapter, of what he calls the Overhead Consciousness. For example, we may have an imagination which seeks to seize the spiritual truth obtaining on the plane of what he calls the Higher Mind, another power of imagination which enables us to grasp the spiritual truth existing on the plane of what he termed the Illumined Mind, and in this way, we go on ascending higher and higher till we reach the level of the Supramental imagination itself endowing the poet with the highest power of contacting the very original home of creative Truth-Consciousness where all creation, essentially speaking, has its starting point. However, as we are not yet spiritually so developed as to understand the subtle distinctions between these different planes of higher spiritual consciousness, each graspable with a particular power of faculty of imagination, Sri Aurobindo contents himself with lumping all of them together under the general term ‘spiritual’. In the same way, we may turn our angle of vision a little differently and instead of thinking of rising higher up in the scale of consciousness to the various Overhead planes, go inward and touch what Sri Aurobindo calls the psychic being, secretly hidden in each one of us, and gradually get so much fixed in it as to develop a whole psychic outlook which not only gives us an altogether different and new orientation to our being and living but succeeds in psychicising our objective, subjective, aesthetic and ‘fanciful’ imaginations, referred to above. As a result of it, we acquire what we may call the power of psychic imagination with characteristics of its own, and get endowed with the innate and spontaneous faculty of catching an object not only in all the details of its outward particularity but in the very reality of its soul. Also the feeling which is caught by the psychic imagination is not only a feeling in all its external sensational and sensuous thrills and vibrations but the very soul of feeling,

1. Ibid., p. 34.

2. Ibid., p. 34.

and the idea, too, is not only an idea in all its external ingenious pattern of apprehension and comprehension but the very soul of idea. Anyway, whether we think of 'spiritual imagination' in its psychic aspect or the varied Overhead aspect, the one important thing which Sri Aurobindo stresses is that unless the poet develops this kind of imagination and seeks to write under its inspirational pressure, he cannot be said to have performed the deeper and higher or even the essential and fundamental task of poetic expression.

Similarly, "pleasure, certainly", as he says, like most critics, "we expect from poetry as from all art". But we have to distinguish the specific as well as the highest kind of pleasure which poetry is capable of giving us, and which, therefore, we should legitimately demand from a poet. The kind of aesthetic pleasure i.e. "the external sensible and even the inner imaginative pleasure", which we usually associate with poetry, is, according to him, only the first of its pleasures; and even here there is ample scope for heightening and refinement. As the poet's consciousness and sense of responsibility increase, he feels the necessity of refining his art "in order to meet the highest requirement of the intelligence, the imagination and the ear". But "they have to be still further heightened and in their nature raised beyond their own noblest levels". Why? one may naturally ask. Why should the poet go on refining his sensuous, emotional, intellectual, imaginative, aesthetic faculties so that they get raised even beyond their own noblest levels? The simple answer, as is suggested by him, is that all these faculties, howsoever refined and raised to their own highest and noblest levels, do not really attain their highest or even their true fulfilment, their true destiny or *Dharma* until we reach the point of our soul which is our true being, and look at everything from that psychic or spiritual level and succeed in suffusing all our instrumental faculties of the mind and the imagination and the vital senses and the body with the illuminating splendours of the soul. It is when these instrumental faculties of ours are thoroughly steeped in the light and delight of the soul that they reach the highest summit of their power. Until we have touched the soul and begun to get ourselves established there with certitude and firmness, we rely on the activities of our mind and the senses and the imagination to give us the highest pleasures in life as well as in art and consider them to

be our highest powers and achievements. But when the soul is touched and we begin to live more and more in it, we undergo a radical transformation of outlook and vision, and our senses, intellect and imagination take a subordinate place and appear to be merely the instruments of our true spiritual being. The soul is now vividly seated at the centre of what we call ourselves and all our intellectual, vital and imaginative faculties have their importance now only at the circumference. It is the soul which, as the central, unifying leader, now works in us through these powers. Just as this happens to us as a man, so it does with a poet, who now comes to realise more and more that it is the spiritual delight from which he was all the time working, though not quite consciously, and at which he was all the time aiming through the efforts of his vital, aesthetic, intellectual or imaginative powers. It becomes clear to him more and more that the poetic activity is, in fact, the activity of his inmost, i.e., spiritual being for its own self-expression, and the intellect and the imagination, emotions and ideas and sensations are merely instruments of his spiritual expression. Also, they are not properly fulfilled and realised until they are thoroughly refined and heightened by the transforming power of the spirit. That is why Sri Aurobindo clearly states that "neither the intelligence, the imagination, nor the ear are the true recipients of the poetic delight, even as they are not its true creator; they are only its channels and instruments: the true creator, the true hearer is the soul".

By this focussing of the interest on the soul both on the part of the creator and the hearer or reader of poetry, the whole conception of poetry is, it is clear, psychologically changed by Sri Aurobindo. Also, he makes the nature of the delight which poetry gives us abundantly precise. Almost all these critics, mentioned above, who point to the production of pleasure as the chief end of the poetic activity appear to imply that the kind of pleasure which poetry evokes is either the vital, emotional, intellectual or imaginative or general aesthetic pleasure, though they are not always precise about it. On the contrary, Sri Aurobindo makes the nature of the poetic delight precise enough and also comprehensive enough, for the 'soul', according to him, is not something which, when it awakens, causes suspension or extinction of the sensuous, vital, intellectual or imaginative powers; on the contrary, these are made the "channels and instruments"

of the soul and are thus not only allowed to play their own respective roles in the poetic activity but under the stress of the soul-power are even 'heightened' to their farthest limits and "in their nature raised beyond their own noblest levels", with the result that each one of them is also fully well psychicised, or spiritualised, and made to reach the highest peak of its own fulfilment. The soul-delight which is the aim of poetry is, thus, a rich, complex, fully integrated delight, giving satisfaction to all the distinctively evolved and responsive parts and powers of the human personality.

Naturally, therefore, Sri Aurobindo cannot regard a poet as essentially in any way less than a spiritual being, a seer or revealer of hidden divine truths. A poet who takes his stand only on his imagination, howsoever lofty and wide, or intellect, howsoever acute and brilliant, or the vital, howsoever rich and delicate, or, on all these taken together, will not be a true and a great poet in the Aurobindonian sense. He has got to exceed the levels and limits of the intelligence and the imagination and the vital senses and establish himself well enough in the soul. That is to say, he must develop into a spiritual being and not remain merely an aesthetic, intellectual or imaginative being. Only then will he be best able to express and interpret to us, in its highest and noblest and most enduring form, "the eternal spirit of Truth and Beauty through some of the infinite variations of beauty, with the word for its instrument". For, though his early and immediate concerns may be with those objects of beauty and images of truth which are readily available to our senses and imagination, his ultimate aim is to gain and communicate an insight into the very "eternal spirit of Truth and Beauty". For this his poetic vision needs to be highly enlarged and lifted inasmuch as it is from the very highest pinnacles of beauty and truth alone that he can see and recreate that divine, infinite, eternal spirit in recognisable, graspable, concrete human terms.

When the poet becomes, thus, a spiritual being and transcends the limits of the physical, the vital and the mental, during his creation, it follows naturally that the true poetic reader or hearer, too, will be no less than a soul. It is only a soul that can recognise and understand another soul. It is, then, self-evident that if a poet becomes himself a soul and sees and writes from the soul level, his creation will not be properly understood

and appreciated until the reader, too, undergoes a similar spiritual transformation, and what is known as his appreciative or critical sensibility, is truly spiritualised. Indeed, these two factors—the poetic creation and the poetic appreciation—can attain the closest possible identity or sympathy and understanding only on the level of the soul. That is why in the first passage quoted above Sri Aurobindo had to state unambiguously that the poet is, after all, “a soul expressing the eternal spirit of Truth and Beauty” and “it is to a similar soul in us seeking the same spirit and responding to it that he makes his appeal”. We are clearly told as to what is demanded of a poet as well as a critic of poetry. The key word in both the cases is the soul.

The question may now be pertinently asked : What is the ‘soul’ ?

It is true that Sri Aurobindo does not define it or explain to us the nature of the ‘soul’ in the contexts where he refers to it in connection with poetry. But there are numerous places in his other writings—notably in *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga*—where his views on this subject are made explicit so as to leave no doubt whatsoever in our mind about what he means by the ‘soul’ and how it is the ‘soul’ which constitutes our true and central being. What is more, the finely exploring and discriminating mind which is ever dynamically operative in his mode of exposition enables him not only to clarify at various places what is meant by the ‘soul’ but also distinguish it from other allied terms used particularly in Indian philosophy, Yoga and religion, such as the ‘jivatman’, ‘the central being’, the ‘psychic being’, etc., or such familiar things as the vital senses, the vital or mental imagination or higher intellect, with all of which it is, in common parlance, loosely identified. In the Western world the situation is even more unfortunate and unsatisfactory. As he says in one of the letters :

“The word ‘soul’, as also the word ‘psychic’, is used very vaguely and in many different senses in the English language. More often than not in ordinary parlance no clear distinction is made between mind and soul and often there is an even more serious confusion, for the vital being of desire—the false soul or desire-soul—is intended by the words soul and psychic and not the true soul, the psychic being.¹

1. As he says in another letter :

“There is . . . the error of the modern or European mentality which so easily

"The psychic being is quite different from the mind or vital; it stands behind them where they meet in the heart. Its central place is there, but behind the heart rather than in the heart; for what men call usually the heart—is the seat of emotion, and human emotions are mental-vital impulses, not ordinarily psychic in their nature. This mostly secret power behind, other than the mind and the life-force, is the true soul, the psychic being in us. The power of the psychic, however, can act upon the mind and vital and body, purifying thought and perception and emotion (which then becomes psychic feeling) and sensation and action and everything else in us and preparing them to be divine movements."¹

Indeed, the psychic being, the "mostly secret power" within us is not only "quite different from the mind or vital" but also different, if we try to be truly precise and discriminating, from the 'Jivataman', the central being, the 'spark-soul', etc., current in the vocabulary of Indian Yoga and philosophy.

Now when the word 'soul' is used by Sri Aurobindo in connection with poetry, it may be taken that he uses it in a large comprehensive sense so as to include in its gamut all that is meant by the 'Jivataman', the 'spark-soul', the 'psychic-being', etc., as indicated in the said letter, in order to distinguish it chiefly from the mind and the vital with which it is usually confused in our thought and speech. Here he does not use the word 'soul' in any fine discriminatory philosophical or Yogic sense but in its totality of experience. But if we wish to be metaphysically precise, it is in the sense of the 'psychic being' which is an individual formation in each one of us by "the soul in its evolution"² and which remains veiled at first by mind, vital and body that he uses the term and not in the sense of the 'Jivatman' which being "self-existent above the manifested or instrumental being . . . is superior to birth and death, always the same".³ However, this is not so important for our purpose here as the way in which this 'soul' or 'psychic being', which is quite different from the mind, the vital and the physical,

confuses the mentalised vital or life being with the soul and the idealising mind with spirituality." (*Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, 3rd Series, p. 299)

1. *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, 1st Series, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1947, pp. 149-50.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

operates within us. As Sri Aurobindo indicates in the letter, it is an evolutionary thing in us like the mind and body, is "at first veiled by mind, vital and body", and yet keeps on supporting them from behind and thus keeps on "growing by their experiences". And as it grows, "it becomes capable of coming forward and dominating the mind, life and body". When it actually becomes dominant and is able to use its instruments of the mind, life and body freely, then not only "the impulse towards the Divine becomes complete" but "the transformation of mind, vital and body, and not merely their liberation, becomes possible".¹ That is to say, these various instruments of ours get also psychicised and divinised, instead of being suspended or wiped out of existence altogether. Here is, thus, very clearly indicated the relation between the psychic being or the soul and the instruments of our being like the mind, vital and body which, as a result of the veil of ignorance lying upon our ordinary consciousness, we falsely take to be our true selves until we awaken to our psychic being which is our true and inmost being. Once such an integral awakening takes place, gradually reorientating our consciousness and action towards the psychic centre, we are filled with "the aspiration . . . for the opening of the whole lower nature, mind, vital, body to the Divine, for the love and union with the Divine, for its presence and power within the heart".² And what do we begin to gain as a result of this psychic aspiration? Sri Aurobindo is explicit to us again. "The sense of peace, purity and calm is brought about by the union of the lower with the higher consciousness. It is usually either intermittent or else remains in a deeper consciousness, veiled often by the storm and agitations of the surface; it is seldom permanent at first, but it can become permanent by increased frequency and endurance of the calm and peace and finally by the full descent of the eternal peace and calm and silence of the higher consciousness into the lower nature."³

That is to say, the psychic consciousness has, to put it a little logically, a two-fold action upon us. It fills us with the aspiration "for the love and union with the Divine, for its presence and power within the heart (as

1. Ibid., p. 144.

2. Ibid., p. 146.

3. Ibid., p. 146.

also), for the opening of the whole lower nature, mind, vital, body to the Divine", and, as a result of it or even simultaneously, brings about "the full descent of the eternal peace and calm and silence of the higher consciousness into the lower nature".

Now it is with such an emerging and developing psychic consciousness, at first slowly and partially, but ultimately fully dominating and controlling the instrumental faculties of the mind, the vital, the imagination, the senses with perfect ease and mastery that the poet truly creates at his highest and most intense and is, finally, able to produce that kind of delight which is known as Ananda in the Indian aesthetic and metaphysical terminology. The highest and deepest poetic delight is, thus, in the ultimate analysis, akin to that beauty and bliss realisable by the Yogis as *Brahmānanda* or *Sachchidānanda*. That is why, Sri Aurobindo follows up his famous statement — "the true creator, the true hearer is the soul" — by explicitly stating: "Therefore poetry has not really done its work, at least the highest work, until it has raised the pleasure of the instrument and transmuted it in the deeper delight of the soul."¹ And what is this "deeper delight of the soul" really like? It is nothing less than, to quote him again, "a divine Ananda, a delight interpretative, creative, revealing, formative, — one might almost say, an inverse reflection of the joy which the universal soul has felt in its great release of energy when it rang out into the rhythmic forms of the universe the spiritual truth, the large interpretative idea, the life, the power, the emotion of things packed into its original creative vision".² It is "such spiritual joy which the soul of the poet feels and which, when he can conquer the human difficulties of his task, he succeeds in pouring also into all those who are prepared to receive it. And this delight is not merely a godlike pastime; it is a great formative and illuminative power".³

We, thus, see here how Sri Aurobindo with his large powerful utterance takes us back to the very ancient Vedantic aesthetic and philosophical traditions. According to the Vedantic conception of art in Indian aesthetics, its ultimate purpose is to provide *Rasa* of the very supreme

1. *F.P.*, p. 13.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Reality.¹ As Dr. P. J. Choudhury says "...aesthetic delight is of an extraordinary kind. It is of the same kind (though less in range and vividness) as the sublime delight of Ishwara contemplating the world of *māyā*. Thus it is that the aesthetic delight is regarded as akin to the relish of God (*Brahmāsvādsachiva*) in Indian aesthetics."² He also says: "The individual self in an aesthetic attitude rises, though temporarily and in a small degree, to his next higher state, Ishwarahood."³

Late Prof. Hirianna, the celebrated author of various philosophical books, also draws our attention to this basic truth of Vedantic aesthetics, when he says in a language of convincing lucidity:

"The immediate aim of art ...being pure delight, the theory of Rasa in the Vedanta will be known if we ascertain the conditions that determine a pleasurable attitude of the mind. The overcoming of desire is the indispensable condition of pleasure. The artist has therefore to induce an attitude of detachment and he can easily do it by means of the ideal creations of his art. Being products of fancy they cannot awaken desire and when attention is once concentrated upon them, the ordinary state of tension caused by selfish desires is relaxed and joy ensues as a matter of course. The various devices of art such as rhythm, symmetry, etc., are intended to help this concentration and successfully maintain it. They also serve another important purpose, viz., securing unity to the subject portrayed...the knower who enjoys perfect beatitude realises unity in Nature's diversity. Similarly, in artistic perception also, which is followed by pure delight, there is a realisation of unity in variety. But while in the one case what is realised is the truth of Nature, it is in the other the truth of art. The latter, no doubt, is a lower truth; but there is yet a close resemblance between the two attitudes

1. "*Raso Vai Sah*"—Verily 'That' is the Rasa.

Rasam hye vāyam labdhvānandi bhavati—It is by getting and realising the 'Rasa' of 'That' that the beings of the world feel true delight.

Sri Aurobindo has translated these two verses of Taittiriya Upanishad, Brahmananda Valli, Chap. 7, as follows:

"...verily, it is no other than the delight behind existence. When he has got him this delight, then it is that this creation becomes a thing of bliss...."

(*Eight Upanishads*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1960, p. 203).

2. *A Vedantic Aesthetics in Studies in Comparative Aesthetics* by Dr. P. J. Choudhury, Visvabharati, Santiniketan, 1953, p. 102.

3. *Ibid.*, 103

and we may well compare the person appreciating art to a *jivanmukta*. He does indeed get a foretaste of *moksha* then....”¹

Here, by the way, we also get in a nutshell some idea of the spiritual method or discipline which is to be followed by both the creator and the recipient of art in order to experience that pure delight which is the aim of all art, including the art of poetry.

Even in the later times of classical Sanskrit literary critics we find that this Vedantic spiritual tradition of poetry is not entirely absent, although the majority of Sanskrit critics, as we have seen before, practise and theorise about it more as an aesthetic and technical art than any serious affair of the human soul. We find, for example, that according to Abhinavagupta, one of the supreme exponents of Indian aesthetics, the true aesthetic feeling is no ordinary feeling but a kind of spiritual joy akin to the joy in realisation of God. He calls it “*Para-brahmasvāda Sachiva*” (*Locana* 2.4).

Viswanatha, another major critical figure in Sanskrit literature, is, in his *Sāhitya Darpaṇa*, III, 2-3, no less explicit about it when he defines *rasaṣvādāna* or aesthetic experience thus:

“flavour (*rasah*) is tasted (*asvadyate*) by men having an innate knowledge of absolute values, in exaltation of the pure consciousness (*sattvodrekaḥ*), as self-luminous (*svaprakasah*), in the mode at once of ecstasy and intellect (*ananda-cim-mayah*), void of contact with things knowable (*Vedyantara-sparsa-sunyah*), twin brother to the tasting of Brahma (*Brahmasvāda-sahodarah*), whereof the life is a superworldly lightning-flash (*lokottara-camat-kara pranah*), as intrinsic aspect (*svakaravat*), in indivisibility (*abhinnatve*).”²

And in modern times, too, we find that Rabindranath Tagore equates the artistic delight more or less with the delight which is experienced as the result of the play not of the mind or the senses or imagination but of the soul itself. As Dr. P. J. Choudhury says: “Tagore holds that true joy springs from the plenitude of our spirit.”³ This joy is neither intellectual nor affective, nor is it conative, it is spiritual and is realised when the spirit of man functions unhindered; and it is under the pressure and with

1. *Art Experience* by M. Hiriyanna, 1954, p. 10.

2. Translated by Ānanda K. Coomaraswamy in *Transformation of Nature in Art*, Dover Publications, New York, 1934, pp. 48-49.

3. *Op. cit.*, p. 108.

the aid of such a deeper joy of the spirit that the artist, the poet really creates his immortal verse.

Ānanda K. Coomaraswamy, one of the greatest and most authoritative exponents of Indian art in our times, —and his views are applicable to the art of poetry as well,—also says that all the arts are to be “thought of as having a divine origin, and as having been revealed or otherwise brought down from Heaven to Earth”.¹ As to the nature of aesthetic experience he defines it thus, drawing, of course, mostly upon Viswanatha’s *Sahitya Darpana* :

“Pure aesthetic experience is theirs in whom the knowledge of ideal beauty is innate; it is known intuitively, in intellectual ecstasy without accompaniment of ideation, at the highest level of conscious being; born of one mother with the vision of God, its life is as it were a flash of blinding light of transmundane origin, impossible to analyse, and yet in the image of our very being.”²

Also, at the end of his essay on *The Theory of Art in Asia*, he makes a very significant statement which deserves to be noted particularly by the Western aestheticians and literary critics. He says :

“The Indian theory, in origin, and formulation, seems at first sight to be *sui generis*. But merely because of the specific idiomatic and mythical form in which it finds expression, it need not be thought of as otherwise than universal. It does not in fact differ from what is implicit in the Far Eastern view of art, or, on the other hand, in any essentials from the scholastic Christian point of view, or what is asserted in the aphorisms of Blake; it does differ essentially from the modern non-intellectual interpretation of art as sensations.”³

And then Ānanda K. Coomaraswamy sums up the Asiatic theory of art thus :

“What are probably the most significant elements in the Asiatic theory are the views (i) that aesthetic experience is an ecstasy in itself inscrutable, but in so far as it can be defined, a delight of the reason⁴, and (ii) that the work

1. *The Theory of Art in Asia in Transformation of Nature in Art*, op. cit., p. 8.

2. Ibid. p. 49.

3. Ibid., p. 56.

4. Here by ‘reason’ we are not to infer that he is thinking of logical or scientific reason. He has, most probably, in view the function of some higher intelligence or higher mind, working intuitively and more rapidly and keenly and luminously than the timid and cautious and fragmentary steps of the logical mind. It may

of art itself, which serves as the stimulus to the release of the spirit from all inhibitions of vision, can only come into being and have being as a thing ordered to specific ends. Heaven and Earth are united in the analogy.... of art which is an ordering of sensation to intelligibility and tends towards an ultimate perfection in which the seer perceives all things imaged in himself.”¹

The Indian aesthetic tradition from the ancient times to the present is, thus, in one way or another, fully behind the Aurobindonian conception of the ultimate rationale of the poetic creation and poetic communication as well as the distinctive spiritual nature of the poetic delight.

Thus, though it was stated before that poetry has been usually taken both in the East and in the West to be an art or craft of words for the purpose of creating at least a sensuous or imaginative, i.e., aesthetic vital or mental image of beauty and joy, we see now that it does not give us the whole truth of the matter. And the outstanding fact which we may unmistakably observe is that in the deeper moments of one's aesthetic or critical consciousness poetry has always been taken to be a product of the deeper, the very divine spirit of man and a giver of the truly spiritual delight or divine bliss and beatitude or *Ānanda*. What is more, this holds good in the critical, aesthetic tradition of the West no less than in that of the East.

It is, therefore, no less gratifying to see that certain schools of the Western aesthetic tradition, notably the Mediaeval Christian scholastic tradition lay a particular stress, like the Aurobindonian poetics, on the soul-element in artistic creation. Jacques Maritain, for example, who is one of the major Christian thinkers and exponents of mediaeval scholastic art in our times, tells us that aesthetic feeling is no ordinary feeling but a kind of spiritual joy.² He says in even more explicit terms in his profound book, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*³, that poetry is really “that intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human self which is a kind of divination (as was realised in ancient times; the Latin *Vates* was both a poet and a divi-

stand for, as Wordsworth so felicitously puts it, “Reason in her most exalted mood” (*The Prelude*, Book XIV, line 192).

1. op. cit. pp. 56-57.

2. Vide *Art and Scholasticism*, 1946, p. 128.

3. Published in the cheaper edition by the Noonday Press, New York, 1955.

ner)).¹ No wonder, he calls poetry "spiritual energy".²

English and American critics like Shelley, Coleridge, Carlyle, Emerson, Whitman, Lowell, Middleton Murry, Charles Morgan, etc., have, without any doubt, got some clear inkling of the spiritual nature and aspect of the poetic activity. True, it is hardly clear from their writings that they always or even generally consider the spirit or soul of man as something distinct from and higher than mind, reason or imagination. Their notion or experience of the soul is not as clear and precise as it is in the case of the Indian Yogis, philosophers and aestheticians or the mediaeval Christian savants and mystics. But they do have the distinct feeling that there is something quite transcendental or pre-conceptual about poetry and its source of creation. At any rate, it does not belong to the region of our ordinary mentality or vital or mental feeling and perception. To quote Maritain again:

"...poetry has its source in the pre-conceptual life of the intellect.... But I want to emphasise, from the start, that the very words reason or intellect, where they are related to that spiritual energy which is poetry, must be understood in a much deeper and larger sense than is usual.... reason or the intellect is not merely logical reason; it involves an exceedingly more profound—and more obscure—life, which is revealed to us in proportion as we endeavour to penetrate the hidden recesses of poetic activity. In other words, poetry obliges us to consider the intellect both in its secret well-springs inside the human soul and as functioning in a non-rational (I do not say anti-rational) or non-logical way."³

In *A Defence of Poetry* Shelley speaks of "two kinds of pleasures, one durable, universal and permanent; the other transitory and particular"⁴ and says that the term 'utility' should not be understood only in the sense of the capacity for producing the latter kind of pleasure. On the contrary, "whatever strengthens and purifies the affections, enlarges the imagination, and adds spirit to sense"⁵ is also useful. Here it is clear that Shelley is thinking of something deeper than the senses, the affections and the imagination, which alone is capable of

1. Ibid., p. 3.

2. Ibid., p. 3.

3. Ibid., pp. 3-4.

4. *English Critical Essays, XIX Century*, Oxford University Press, 1935, p. 151.

5. Ibid., p. 151.

producing the "durable, universal and permanent" kind of pleasure in human life. And no wonder if he equates the pleasure afforded to man by poetry with this kind of universal and permanent pleasure. This becomes all the more clear to us when we find him telling us that "poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. . . . it is that from which all springs, and that which adorns all. . . . It is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of all things. . . ."¹ And when he asks the question: "What were virtue, love, patriotism, friendship what were the scenery of this beautiful universe which we inhabit, what were our consolations on this side of the grave and what were our aspirations beyond it, if poetry did not ascend to bring light and fire from those eternal regions where the out-winged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar?"², we have no doubt in our mind that he is thinking of the poetic activity as a spiritual and not merely a sensuous, aesthetic, emotional or even imaginative one. In any case, we need not doubt that Shelley had the realisation that the faculty of imagination which characterises the poet, possessing as it did the power to "ascend to bring light and fire from. . . . eternal regions", was a sufficiently spiritual and not a mere vital or intellectual faculty. Also, when he stated that "Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds",³ he had the intuitive knowledge that "it is as it were the interpenetration of a divine nature through our own".⁴ The Shelleyan view of the poetic imagination, poetic pleasure and poetic function is, thus, sufficiently uncommon and transcendental.

Wordsworth and Coleridge, too, among the great English Romantics, had a sublime and clearly spiritual conception of poetry. If it is looked upon as "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge. . . . the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science"⁵

1. Ibid., p. 155.

2. Ibid., p. 156.

3. Ibid., p. 157.

4. Ibid., p. 157.

5. *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, in *Selections from Wordsworth*, edited by David Nichol Smith, Oxford University Press, 1938, p. 165.

and as capable enough of "binding together by passion and knowledge, the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time",¹ it is obvious that Wordsworth did not think of poetry in the usual traditional aesthetic, imaginative sense only. His romanticism had something truly spiritual about it, as several of his poetic passages amply testify. No wonder, when his long career was drawing to its close, he wrote in a letter: "What I should myself most value in my attempts (is) the spirituality with which I have endeavoured to invest the material universe, and the moral relations under which I have wished to exhibit its most ordinary appearances."² Though the second part of this statement tends to lower a little the value of his poetic attempts and shows that in spite of his being endowed with a fine and deep sensibility and intelligence he could not have a clear sense of distinction between the spiritual and moral values, yet we cannot fail to perceive here that at its finest, Wordsworth's conception of poetry was something more than merely emotional and vital or moral and intellectual.

Coleridge's was a profounder and subtler philosophical critical mind than Wordsworth's and so when he tried to define what a poet is and how he performs his task, he could give us a statement which is deeply harmonious and pregnant and shows beyond doubt that his sensibility was, in his acute moments of thinking, essentially a spiritually integrated and enlightened thing. The statement is fairly long but the whole of it deserves to be quoted. He says:

"The poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of Imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control.... reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness with difference; of the general with the concrete; the Idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects; a more than

1. Ibid., p. 165.

2. Ibid., Introduction, p. xviii.

usual state of emotion with more than usual order; judgment ever awake and steady; self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling, profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonises the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry. 'Doubtless', as Sir John Davies observes of the soul—(and his words may with slight alteration be applied, and even more appropriately, to the poetic Imagination)—

Doubtless this could not be, but that she turns
 Bodies to *spirit* by sublimation strange,
 As fire converts to fire the things it burns,
 As we our good into nature change.
 From their gross matter she abstracts *their* forms
 And draws a kind of quintessence from things;
 Which to her proper nature she transforms
 To bear them light on her celestial wings.
Thus does she, when from *individual states*
 She doth abstract the universal kinds :
Which then re-clothed in divers names and fates
Steal access through the senses to our minds.

Finally, Good Sense is the Body of the poetic Genius, Fancy its Drapery, Motion its Life, and Imagination the Soul that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole."¹

The great transformative and sympathetically unifying power which Coleridge here attributes to the poetic imagination by virtue of which the poet creates, bringing "the whole soul of man into activity", is something truly unique in literary criticism. It is a power which can manifest itself best and with that immense variety and largeness, referred to by Coleridge, only on the level of the soul. It is there and not on the level of the mind—unless, of course, we are thinking of the Supermind, as understood, realised and described by Sri Aurobindo in his Yogic and philosophical works—, that we can perceive the large, luminous faculty of our imagination as binding the whole universe and all its various and multifarious activities and operations, mostly contradictory in appearance, together into one peacefully integrated whole. This is the cosmic, Universal Unity which the spiritual eye sees. There can be no doubt, therefore, that this power of the poetic Imagination to which Coleridge refers here, is essentially as well as

dynamically a high spiritual power and no mere sensuous, vital or intellectual faculty, nor can it be dismissed as some sort of a high-strung romantic day-dreaming, induced by opium-addiction.

Though Keats is usually regarded as a sensuous poet who in course of his poetic career was both maturing in thought and moving towards some coherent and exalted and even luminous intellectual philosophy about poetry, particularly in its triune aesthetic aspect of beauty and truth and joy he, too, it appears, had, at moments, very fine and subtle intuition of the power of the Spirit really animating and intensifying the poetical nature or sensibility. What, in one of his letters, dated the 27th October, 1819 and written to Woodhouse, he tried to describe as 'the poetical character', is something which only the human soul can truly and best realise. This is how his description goes:

"As to the poetical character itself—I mean that sort, of which, if I am anything, I am a member; that sort distinguished from the Wordsworthian or egoistical sublime—it is not itself—it has no self—It is everything and nothing.—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated. It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet.... A poet is most unpoetical of anything in existence because he has no Identity—he is continually in for and filling some other body."

An account like this about the true poetic nature and its completely free, undifferentiating way of working can come only from a person who has been able to experience, however momentarily, an integral release from one's own ego and ordinary personality, on the level of the soul, for the kind of 'characterlessness' or impersonality or the ability to establish an instantaneous, spontaneous identity with everybody and everything, losing all sense of distinction between, say, an Iago and an Imogen is never possible to the man of the senses or mere sensuousness or vital-mental imagination or the man of the intellect or a moral and religious temperament, conscious of the sharp notions of virtue and sin.

But it is, above all, in his less well-known but deeply philosophical and, as Middleton Murry rightly says, "the greatest of all his letters"¹ where he speaks of the

1. *Selected Criticism*, 1916-1957 of Middleton Murry, chosen and introduced

world as "the vale of soul-making"¹ that Keats shows a truly revealing knowledge of the soul and of its clear distinction from the Mind and Heart and the Body. When one reads it in the light of Murry's interpretation, one cannot help coming to the surprising conclusion that Keats's knowledge of the Soul is not only clear and competent in itself but distinctly different from the one with which it is usually understood by even the educated and cultured people of the West and comes very close to the ancient integral Vedantic experience. It must be said to the credit of Murry that here he succeeds in presenting a portrait of Keats which not only fills us with great admiration for his developing, and, at times, maturely awakened consciousness but obliges us also to revise our preconceptions about the Keatsian poetic and philosophic sensibility.

One of the remarkable statements in that letter is the following :

"The common cognomen of this World among the misguided and supersitious is 'a vale of tears', from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven. What a little circumscribed straightened notion ! Call the world if you please 'The vale of soul-making.' Then you will find out the use of the world (I am speaking now in the highest terms for human nature admitting it to be immortal which I will here take for granted for the purpose of showing a thought which has struck me concerning it). I say '*Soul-making*'—Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence. There may be intelligences or sparks of the Divinity in millions—but they are not souls until they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. Intelligences are atoms of perception—they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God.

"How then are Souls to be made ? How are these sparks which are God to have identity given them—so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each one's individual existence ? This point I sincerely wish to consider because I think it a grander system of salvation than the Christian religion—or rather it is a system of Spirit creation . . . I can scarcely express what I but dimly perceive—and yet I think I perceive it—that you may judge the more clearly I will

by Richard Rees, Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 114.

1. A very sound and detailed elucidation of and comment upon this letter is given by Middleton Murry in his *Keats and Shakespeare*: this is also reproduced in *Ibid.*, pp. 113-126.

put it in the most homely form possible.

"I will call the *world* a school instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read. I will call the *human heart* the *horn Book* read in that School. And I will call the *Child able to read*, the *Soul* made from that *School* and its *horn Book*. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and Troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways. Not merely is the Heart a Horn book. It is the Mind's Bible, it is the Mind's experience, it is the test from which the Mind or Intelligence sucks its identity. As various as the Lives of Men are, so various becomes their Souls, and thus does God make individual beings, Souls, Identical Souls of the sparks of his own essence. . . ."¹

This is, indeed, a true and profound Vedantic experience of the Spirit, human as well as divine; and the experience is also as fairly integral as it can be. It appears we are reading some truly spiritual writer of the East, who has had a real realisation of the integral Divine Self and the secret of its deeper working in the Universe. No wonder if the Christian religion with its explanation of the universe in terms of 'a vale of tears' is found inadequate by Keats. This letter of Keats is, indeed, a unique spiritual revelation in English literature and I do not think that Middleton Murry has been swept off his feet in his admiration of Keats when he says "the Keats who wrote that letter was not an apprentice to knowledge; he was one of the most marvellous human beings of whom the world holds record".² Our only regret is that Keats's unfortunate premature death did not allow him to develop this experience to the farthest limit and make use of it in a spiritually dynamic and creative manner either in his poetry or in critical utterances in his letters. But this much can be easily conceded that had he lived longer and got himself firmly and peaceably established in the deep integral spiritual experience he mentions in this letter and applied it to his poetic sensibility by increasingly 'psychichising', to use Sri Aurobindo's phrase, or spiritualising it, it would have given an entirely new orientation and dynamism to his poetry. Even as it is, we may, to an appreciable extent, agree with Middleton Murry when he claims for Keats "that he was

1. Quoted in *Selected Criticism*, op. cit., p. 117.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

indeed homogeneous and at one with himself, that he conquered this oneness, that in his letter on "soul-making" he gave the most faithful account he could of the process by which he conquered it. This was the process by which Keats himself believed he attained the condition of soul in which he wrote the first poetry which was indubitably and unmistakably Keats' and Keats' alone; by which he became, in fact, a great English poet, second only to Shakespeare"¹

The claim for Keats's personal spiritual, i.e., "homogeneous" condition is, no doubt, a big one and easily disputable but the discerning reader of Keats's poetry and letters cannot fail to perceive that though there flow on their surface charming as well as enduring currents of a richly endowed and human-warm vital sensuous imagination, irradiated and illuminated at times by sublime flashes of immortal thought, there is also to be felt, to some extent, and with some intensity, a serenely flushing, soul-suffusing undercurrent of a potentially noble spirituality at "the living poetic centre within him".²

When, next, we enter the Victorian times, we find that Carlyle makes the spiritual basis or origin of poetry no less explicit. He says, "Poetic beauty, in its pure essence, is not . . . derived from anything external, or of merely intellectual origin; not from association, or any reflex or reminiscence of mere sensations . . . It dwells and is born in the inmost spirit of Man, united to all love of Virtue, to all true belief in God."³

Ralph Waldo Emerson has also a very high conception of the poet. This is clear enough from his essay on *The Poet*. The poets, according to him, are "liberating Gods"⁴, for "the use of symbols has a certain power of emancipation and exhilaration for all men".⁵ Naturally, therefore, the faculty of the imagination with which the poet works is not of an ordinary order. Says he, "This insight, which expresses itself by what is called imagination, is a very high sort of seeing . . . It is a secret which every intellectual man quickly learns, that beyond the

1. Ibid., p. 124.

2. *F.P.*, p. 48.

3. Quoted in *Theory of Poetry in England* by R. P. Cowl, Macmillan & Co., 1914, pp. 306-307.

4. *Literary Criticism in America*, edited by Albert D. Van Nostrand, Forum Books The Liberal Arts Press, New York, 1957, p. 57.

5. Ibid., p. 66.

energy of his possessed and conscious intellect he is capable of a new energy (as of an intellect doubled on itself), by abandonment to the nature of things.... The poet knows that he speaks adequately then only when he speaks somewhat wildly, or "with the flower of the mind"; not with the intellect used as an organ, but with the intellect released from all service and suffered to take its direction from its celestial life; or as the ancients were wont to express themselves, not with intellect alone but with the intellect inebriated by nectar".¹ And at another place he says that "poetry is not 'Devil's wine' but 'God's wine'".²

In still clearer tones and surer language Walt Whitman speaks of the stuff of greatness of which a poet of course, a true poet – is made. In the *Preface to Leaves of Grass* as written in 1855 there are one or two passages where he speaks of the precise nature of the poetic quality. "The poetic quality", he says, "is not marshalled in rhyme or uniformity or abstract addresses to things nor in melancholy complaints or good precepts, but... is in the soul."³ Again he says, "The greatest poet does not moralise or make applications of morals... he knows the soul."⁴ No wonder, he felt like the ancients that "the greatest poet... is a seer."⁵ It may be that he does not understand by the words "soul" and "seer" all that we in India mean. But these are enough to show where he puts the true emphasis in the poetic activity. The whole of his *Preface* is a hymn to the high calling of the poet, such as one seldom comes across in the usual critical evaluation of poetry or a poet. But it is a conception with which we in India are more familiar and which we cherish still.

James Russell Lowell whose lecture on "The function of the poet" was delivered before the Lowell Institute the same year, i.e., 1855 when Whitman's *Preface* came out, has no less a lofty conception of the poet than Shelley or Emerson or Whitman. No wonder, this lecture of his has been found closely akin to Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*. Taking a bird's eye view of human history he says, "we find tribes rising slowly out of barbarism to a higher or lower point of culture and civility, and every-

1. Ibid., p. 64.

2. Ibid., p. 65.

3. *Literary Criticism in America*, op. cit., p. 120.

4. Ibid., p. 123.

5. Ibid., p. 119.

where the poet also is found, under one name or other, changing in certain outer respects, but essentially the same".¹ Going back to the past he finds that "the poet and the priest were united originally in the same person; which means that the poet was he who was conscious of the world of spirit as well as that of sense, and was the ambassador of the gods to man. This was his highest function, and hence his name of "seer". He was the discoverer and declarer of the perennial beneath the deciduous".² Of course, "gradually the poet as the "seer" became secondary to the "maker". His office became that of entertainer rather than teacher".³ "But always something of the old tradition was kept alive." "Nor have poets lost their power over the future in modern times. And if he has now come to be looked upon merely as the best expresser, the gift of seeing is implied as necessarily antecedent to that, and of seeing very deep, too."⁴ Whatever name we give to the poet, whether that of praiser, seer, soothsayer, the poet is "he who can best see and best say what is ideal—what belongs to the world of soul and of beauty. Whether he celebrates the brave and good man, or the gods, or the beautiful as it appears in man or nature, something of a religious character still clings to him; he is the revealer of Deity. He may be unconscious of his mission; he may be false to it; but in proportion as he is a great poet he rises to the level of it the more often."⁵ Also, when Lowell refers to the poetic gift of imagination, it is not in the usual vital, sensuous, intellectual or merely aesthetic sense that he does so. On the contrary, it distinctly takes on something of the power of the spirit itself, for he says, "... imagination in its highest form gives him (i.e., the poet) the power, as it were, of assuming the consciousness, of whatever he speaks about, whether man or beast, or rock or tree. It is the ring of Canace, which whoso has on understands the language of all created things."⁶ It is by virtue of this spiritual gift of the poetic imagination that a great poet becomes, according to him, "something more than an interpreter between man and nature; he

1. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

is also an interpreter between man and his own nature".¹ Not only this, in the eye of Lowell "the imagination has a deeper use than merely to give poets a power of expression. It is the everlasting preserver of the world from blank materialism".² "The powers of the outer and inner world form hand in hand a magnetic circle for whose connection man is necessary. It is the imagination that takes his hand and clasps it with that other stretched to him in the dark, and for which he was vainly groping. It is that which renews the mystery in nature, makes it wonderful and beautiful again, and out of the gases of the man of science remakes the old spirit."³ It is obvious that all these powers of the imagination which the poet uses can develop only when he rises to the level of the spirit. And just as Emerson and Whitman called upon the prospective poets of their own times and countries to be conscious of their high calling and be, consequently, filled with high aims and ideals, Lowell also declares to the Americans in a reasonably powerful voice that though they may be living in a highly commercial, materialistic age, "Our time is not an unpoetical one. . . . It is nothing against us that we are a commercial people. Athens was a trading community; Dante and Titian were the growth of great marts, and England was already commercial when she produced Shakespeare."⁴ That is to say, the essential poetic quality which is spiritual in nature, can still assert itself even if our senses and our mind feel too much overpowered by the onrush of the forces of materialism and egoism and triviality, such as we find, to our dismay, today.

Coming to our own times, we find that Middleton Murry's conception of poetry is also unmistakably informed by the psychology of the spirit. Whether or no his experience of the human soul or the Divine Reality is as real and profound and distinctive as that with which our ancient poetical and philosophical literature has made us familiar in our country, it cannot be denied that Murry's natural tendency is to go inward into himself or things, to delve deeper into the surface reality, than most of his contemporaries. That is why he cannot think of poetry as anything less than an intuitive, spiritual ac-

1. Ibid., p. 98.

2. Ibid., p. 99.

3. Ibid., p. 105.

4. Ibid., pp. 111-112.

tivity. It is, to quote him, "the direct embodiment through symbols... of a pure, comprehensive and self-satisfying experience which we may call, if we please, an immediate intuition into the hidden nature of things" (*Discoveries*, p. 42). Quite naturally, when he thinks of a poet, he thinks of him in terms of a seer and a prophet and no ordinary vital or mental human being. He says:

"Poetry being intuition into the reality of things which is beyond rational reality, the poet who brings unthinkable thoughts and unsayable things within the range of human minds and ears must be a prophet of what is eternal in the human soul. And a great poet is a prophet, for he keeps the souls of men alive; he does not tell us of spiritual felicity; he creates it in us from the substance of our coarser elements."¹

Thinking of Middleton Murry we are in a way easily reminded of his famous essay on *Pure Poetry*, the writing of which was perhaps motivated by the publication in France of Abbé Henri Bremond's two little books *La Poesie Pure* and *Poesie et Priere*. Now the very title of the latter book is significant enough and its contents, as far as these are referred to by Murry, are no less significant. Bremond discerns in poetry "Magie recueillante... qui nous invite à une quiétude, où nous n'avons plus qu'à nous laisser faire, mais activement, par un plus grand et meilleur que nous. La prose, une phosphorescence vive et voltigeante, qui nous attire loin de nous-mêmes. La poésie, un rappel de l'intérieur..." ("In-drawing magic... which calls us to a quietude, where we have nothing more to do than be carried, but actively, by one greater and better than we are. Prose, a lively leaping phosphorescence which pulls us away from ourselves. Poetry, a reminder of the inward...").² Bremond quotes the phrase of Keats about poems yet to come: "There is an awful warmth about my heart, like a load of immortality." Then he comments: "Ce poids, où veut-il nous précipiter, sinon vers ces augustes retraites où nous attend, où nous appelle une présence plus qu'humaine? S'il en faut croire Walter Pater, 'tous les arts aspirent à rejoindre la musique'. Non, ils aspirent tous, mais chacun par les magiques intermédiaires qui lui sont propres, — les mots; les notes; les couleurs; les lignes; — ils aspirent tous à rejoindre la prière." ("This load, where would it plunge

1. *Countries of the Mind*, Second Series, O.U.P., 1931, p. 31.

2. English translation by K. D. Sethna: 'Talks on Poetry' *Mother India* Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, June 1962, p. 42.

us if not towards those august recesses where awaits us, where beckons us, a presence more than human? If one is to believe Walter Pater, 'all art aspires to the condition of music'. No, all the arts aspire, but each by the magic medium proper to it—words, notes, colours, lines—they all aspire to the condition of prayer".¹

Thus Murry rightly comments upon Bremond and his book: "In it he is plainly speaking of the effect of poetry upon the reader, and he is saying that 'pure poetry' induces in the well-attuned mind a condition akin to that of the silent mystical contemplation which is the supreme form of prayer."²

What is no less relevant for our purpose here is that Bremond's case shows that there is a clear awareness in one of the most civilised and intellectually grown-up countries of modern Europe that there is a real and deep connection between poetry and prayer, poetry and silent mystical contemplation, poetry and mystical rapture. No wonder, if, as Murry tells us, Bremond's book created quite a sensation and released a good deal of even heated controversy in the most intellectual literary circle of France, namely, the French Academy. Living as we do in an age dominated by intellect and scientific reason which have been allowed by us to guide and have the last say even in matters religious, spiritual and mystical, not to speak of those concerning the fine arts, including poetry, it need not surprise us if Bremond by propounding a mystical theory of poetry appeared to have "quite upset the rationalistic livers"³ of the "Immortals" of the French Academy. But we may rest assured that had it not touched some really sensitive and psychologically inward corner of the human spirit, the reaction to the book might not have been so violent. On the other hand, as Murry himself testifies in that essay on *Pure Poetry*, Bremond's apparently startling and rationality-shocking statement about poetry passed without any "serious notice" and "certainly without serious hostility" in England; it even accorded "well enough both with our religious and with our poetic tradition".⁴ Thus an action, in the true sense of the term, of the spirit works

1. English translation by K. D. Sethna: op. cit., p. 42.

2. Murry: *Pure Poetry in English Critical Essays*, 20th Century, Oxford University Press, Reprinted, 1935, p. 312.

3. K. D. Sethna: op. cit., p. 42.

4. Murry: *Pure Poetry*, op. cit., p. 311.

both ways, negatively as well as positively; and poetry which tries to derive its life and force from such a spiritual action is apt to work in a similar way.

When we, next, turn to Herbert Read, another distinguished literary critic of today who has, in addition, made quite a capital use of the discoveries and researches of modern psychology in explaining and elucidating the origins and motivations of art, we find that though he does not specifically use the word 'spiritual' or 'psychic' or even mystical and religious in connection with it, he, yet, holds an attitude which is closer to the spiritual view of the matter than any other. First of all, we have his clear, unambiguous statement about his own experience as a creative poet: "... I can aver that all the poetry I have written which I continue to regard as authentic poetry was written immediately, instantaneously, in a condition of trance."¹ It is true that the exact nature of trance is not indicated here, but, since Herbert Read speaks of it in the context of what he calls his 'ideal' and 'pure' poetry, and also since, before making this statement, he refers to the high and difficult "degree of concentration and of self-discipline"² on the part of a poet requiring "a withdrawal from the normal activities of life such as the Yogi practise"³, we may not be wrong in inferring that this experience or idea of poetic trance is close to the one which saints and seers know of and practise. At any rate, his "authentic poetry" is not the result of any intense intellectual or physical concentration or any high-strung nervous and vital excitement or passion but something very calm, collected and concentrated from within, the one-pointed poise of the central being. Had it not been so, he would not have said, "Poetry is, properly speaking, a transcendental quality—a sudden transformation which words assume under a particular influence—and we can no more define this quality than we can define a state of grace",⁴ nor would he have declared in this age of positivistic science and rational thought that "all art originates in an act of intuition, or vision".⁵

But Charles Morgan, the famous philosophical English novelist of today, in his essay on *Creative Imagination*

1. *Collected Essays in Criticism*, Faber & Faber, MCMLIV, pp. 110-11.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

surpasses both Middleton Murry and Herbert Read in his subtle grasp and knowledge of the creative, artistic or poetic activity and comes very close to Sri Aurobindo when he says: "The function of Creative Imagination is to produce spiritual change, to change the heart, the nature of a man...an act of Creative Imagination... is ecstatic, not intellectual, and it is a mutual act between the man and his god, a receiving and an impregnation. But, in this case, man is not the giver or impregnator. His prayers, all his religious disciplines, all his great exercises, whether he be Catholic or Protestant, Buddhist or Hindu, have as their purpose to cleanse himself of spiritual impediment, to lay open his heart, to enable himself to receive his god, to permit the Supreme Spirit to enter and ravish him. Every mystical writing that I have ever seen tells, in effect, the same story - not that the man attained to God but that he was at least able to overcome his carnal and intellectual resistance to God. The medieval saints spoke continually in erotic metaphor, likening themselves to a bride that receives her bridegroom. The metaphor varies in form, but throughout the mystical record of all peoples, there may be recognised the same account of an act of Creative Imagination by mutual action between the enraptured man and the Supreme Spirit, an acceptance and an impregnation, fierce with love."¹

In the light of all this evidence, it should become clear to us now that Sri Aurobindo is not speaking something merely abstract and idealistic or strange and fantastic when he calls the poet a soul and the distinctive kind of delight from which the poet creates and which he ultimately produces, as essentially a deeply spiritual delight and not, really speaking, a merely sensuous or aesthetic or imaginative or intellectual joy. As we have seen, the very best and noblest part of the aesthetic tradition both in the East and in the West, in the ancient and modern times, is there to support this theory. Indeed, it is not so much a theory in his case, as a product of personal experience and realisation. That is why his statement has such a fullness of the power of persuasion in it. And not merely fullness of the persuasive power but also a vivid concrete beauty of a living truth, for the way in which he expresses the "Divine Ananda" of the poet as

1. *Reflections in a Mirror*, Second Series, 1946, reproduced in *English Critical Essays*, 20th Century, 2nd Series, Oxford University Press, 1958, pp. 63-64.

“an inverse reflection of the joy which the universal Soul has felt in its great release of energy when it rang out into the rhythmic forms of the universe the spiritual truth. . . .” points to a fact which has been actually and concretely experienced and realised by a number of seers and saints, poets and artists in our country. The Aurobindonian theory of the spiritual source of the creative poetic delight is, thus, fully based upon experience. And it gains in an increased intensity and richness of expression coupled with an assured originality when he adds that “this delight is not merely a godlike pastime; it is a great formative and illuminative power”. We may now understand something of the way in which “the full descent of the eternal peace and calm and silence of the higher consciousness into the lower nature”, of the poet, to which we have referred earlier, works in him when he begins to live in the soul. This does not merely result in a silent passive contemplation of the Absolute or Its creation, nor does it merely “induce an attitude of detachment” as a result of “the overcoming of desire”. On the contrary, it may also acquire a highly dynamic power of creation, “a great formative and illuminative power”, as Sri Aurobindo says. It is by virtue of this power that the poetic spirit is able to seize on the very essence of the truth underlying every object which he gazes at or dreams and contemplates upon, for he becomes perfectly one with it. As this power has the force of liberating him from his ignorant, narrow, fragmentary, physical-vital-mental egoistic self, it becomes naturally easy for him to develop that “poetical character” or “negative capability” spoken by Keats and, thus, to get perfectly identified with all that he sees and feels within or without, ranging from the very highest Reality above to the lowest and most trivial manifestation of it below. The whole activity is like the fusion of the souls and it is as a result of such a fusion that the hidden but illuminating truth of things is revealed to the poet’s vision without any kind of veil upon them, particularly the veil of the falsehood which prevents our ordinary seeing, however vitally moving or physically accurate or mentally sharp and brilliant, from grasping. This is mainly the reason why poetic perceptions and visions are found so different from the usual and ordinary observations achievable by the majority of us and are even found so unreal and fantastic and far-fetched at times to our crude reasoning intellect. The fact is that “the formative and illuminative power” arising out of the

fullness of the ecstasy of his soul lifts him to such a new plane and dimension of consciousness that his seeing no longer remains on the ordinary level. His utterance even about the common familiar objects and feelings and ideas undergoes a sea change, as it were. It becomes the utterance of a wholly transformed or reborn spirit; and in the supreme moments of his creation he is found to be no longer an individual creative genius whose tongue has been touched by just "a blush of rapture on Eternity's face", a spark of the "fire-passion of grace", but some kind of the "Rose of God... Rose of Bliss, fire-sweet, seven-tinged with the ecstasies seven",¹ and it is during these moments that he becomes the mouthpiece of the multiform Divine Reality and utters what Sri Aurobindo calls "the *mantra* of the Real".

We shall speak about the *mantric* power of poetry in the next chapter. What deserves to be noted here is that even when the poet does not reach that supreme height of utterance under the impact of that high spiritual ecstasy which ultimately gets converted into "a great formative and illuminative power", it is in the presence, and under the pressure, of some such power, however diminished and modified, and with the excitement of the soul-delight, however subdued and apparently unconscious, and not with the power of the delight of the mere physical and vital senses or mind or what is usually known as poetic imagination, that the poet really creates even on the lower levels. What Sri Aurobindo wants to impress upon us is that the true poetic delight is utterly different from all other kinds of delight which we usually know, simply because it is essentially, whether the poet himself is conscious of it or not, the delight of the soul. It is with the excitement stirring in the soul that he feels the urge to create, for at that moment he comes to be possessed, in whatever measure possible, by "a great formative and illuminative power" which is quite different from his sensuous, imaginative and intellectual faculties and powers, and which only uses the latter as its channels and instruments of expression. And indeed, as he further says, "the more rapidly and transparently the rest (i.e., the intelligence, the imagination and the ear, etc.) do their work of transmission, the less they make of their separate claim to satisfaction, the more directly the word reaches and sinks deep into the soul, the greater the

1. Vide Sri Aurobindo's *Rose of God*.

poetry.”¹ That is to say, the true organic function of the senses, and the intellect and the imagination is, in the poetic activity, but to transmit and transcribe submissively, faithfully and uninterferingly, if possible, what the soul—the true creator—has to communicate. And this function can be best served only when the pleasure which is creatively felt by these instruments of soul-transmission is allowed to be “raised and transmuted into the deeper delight of the soul”.

This is but another way of saying that the true poetic delight is not just akin to or reminiscent of the spiritual delight—Brahmananda—as the ancient Sanskrit aestheticians stated. On the contrary, it is essentially a spiritual delight itself, a stirring in the very depths of the soul itself; it is nothing less than “a divine Ananda—a delight interpretative, creative, revealing, formative”. It is as a result of this deeply felt delight of the soul that the poet becomes a creator in the true sense of the term—only here the creation is effected by means of words. But are these words used and marshalled in the usual way? Evidently not. Like the poetic delight the poetic word—and we may include the poetic rhythm and imagery too—is a special kind of word and has a special role to play. Says Sri Aurobindo:

“The rhythmic word has a subtly sensible element, its sound value, a quite immaterial element, its significance or thought-value, and both of these again, its sound and its sense, have separately and together a soul value, a direct spiritual power, which is infinitely the most important thing about them.”²

Indeed, the most proper, magical and felicitous way for the spiritual poetic delight to express is to “utter itself in an inspired rhythm and an innate, a revealed word, even as the universal Soul created the harmonies of the universe out of the power of the word, secret and eternal within him, leaving the mechanical work to be done in a surge of hidden spiritual excitement by the subconscious part of his Nature”,³ and it is “this highest speech which is the supreme poetic utterance”.⁴ Once again we see that the individual poetic soul does on the earthly or human plane in the kingdom of words what the universal

1. *F.P.*, p. 13.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

soul does on a cosmic universal plane. If the supreme individual poetic delight is the "inverse reflection of the joy which the universal Soul has felt", the supreme poetic utterance is but the echo "of the word, secret and eternal within" the universal soul, heard and felt on the individual human plane of speech. And it is this echo-power inherently packed with the universal soul-delight which "makes the rhythmic word of the poet the highest form of speech available to man for the expression whether of his self-vision or of his world-vision".¹ That is to say, the soulful formative and illuminative power of the true and highest poetic delight transforms the very power and potentiality of the word humanity uses. No wonder, if we find, says Sri Aurobindo, that poetry "brings out not only the definitive intellectual value of the word, not only its power of emotion and sensation, its vital suggestion, but through and beyond these its soul-suggestion, its spirit. So poetry arrives at the indication of infinite meanings beyond the finite intellectual meaning the word carries. It expresses not only the life-soul of man as did the primitive word, not only the ideas of his intelligence for which speech now usually serves, but the experience, the vision, the ideas, as we may say, of the higher and wider soul in him. Making them real to our life-soul as well as present to our intellect, it opens to us by the word the doors of the Spirit."²

This is, broadly speaking, the way "the great formative and illuminative power" of the "seven-ecstasied" poetic spirit operates, and creates its immortal works. It is not just a neutral-tinted and disinterested power, standing away, in a negatively static and serenely aloof, self-satisfied poise of contemplation, from the chequered, pleasure-and-pain-woven but illusory, unreal multiplicity of the creation below, as some of the orthodox interpreters of Vedantic aesthetics have declared, but a dynamically and powerfully living truth which deploys its manifold energy every moment in creating universe after universe, as it were, in sheer ecstasies of formation, illumination and revelation. Had this poetic delight not been such a dynamic power, it would have been hardly able to create. That is why a statement like the following does not sound satisfying enough :

"...the universal spirit engaged in this game of creation

1. Ibid., p. 15.

2. Ibid., p. 18.

and enjoyment is Ishwara. Brahman as conjurer is *mydhisa* who tastes through us sublime delight. Ishwara's power of (and delight in) creation and sublation has its source in Brahman, the one who adopts the Ishwara grade of spirit momentarily...Brahman is, essentially one and undifferentiated and He, after a moment's caprice for some 'other', relapses into His ancient mood with great relief. He cannot stand for long the strain of the other which presses on His consciousness. It is created for fun. But even this fun cannot be said to be a necessary qualification of Brahman who may be conceived without any real relation to his occasional lapses (*maya*) just as a dreamer or a poet may be viewed apart from his dreams and poetry. The two moments or poles of attitude towards the conjured word present in Brahman, while at creative play, are love of diversion and a love of His sole self to enjoy nothing but Himself. In Ishwara, therefore, the two moments work simultaneously. He feels himself as a wielder of *maya*, the world and the attached emotions appear to Him as somehow his own creations and so He delights in their appearance as well as in realisation of their lack of objectivity, necessity or absolute reality. The world and the motions, therefore, do not affect Him as they do the individual ego. The consciousness of the unreality of the unreal brings awareness of the Real who is approached through the repeated recognition of what He is not (*neti neti*). Hence the aesthetic delight."¹

This is interpreting the nature of the aesthetic delight along the traditional *mayavada* philosophy of *Vedanta*. Therefore, although here, too, the aesthetic delight is naturally regarded as of an extraordinary kind, it is yet declared to be "of the same kind (though less in range and vividness) as the sublime delight of Ishwara contemplating the world of *maya*".² Also, says Dr. Choudhury, pursuing the path of the *māyavadin*, the resultant "experience of beauty helps to make us progressively conscious of the illusoriness of the empirical world and ego-life and the reality of the higher and non-attached spirit within us".³ The whole position is summed up thus: "The individual self in an aesthetic attitude, rises, though temporarily and in a small degree, to his next higher state, Ishwarahood. The objects lose in this state

1. P. J. Choudhury : op. cit., p. 101.

2. Ibid., p. 102.

3. Ibid., p. 102.

their empirical reality for him and appear in their universal emotive aspect that induces serene contemplation instead of realistic effects. Thus the aesthetic self transcends itself and participates in a more elevated state. This experience of self-transcendence and illusory objectivity of the presentations is attended with extraordinary delight.”¹

Here we find that apart from the observation that the aesthetic delight is taken to be “less in range and vividness” than the “sublime delight of Ishwara” and, therefore, is not on par with the latter, we are made to see and accept that the sublime delight of Ishwara chiefly consists in something like a detached serene contemplation of “the world of *maya*”. The spiritual delight here is put at no higher and greater level than that of passive serene contemplation of an object, which accrues to us when we lie in an utterly detached, withdrawn mood, feeling no other interest in the object than that it is all illusory. Though the object is felt as the creation of one’s own Ishwarahood, it is also felt at the same time as “lacking in objectivity, necessity or absolute reality”, i.e., as something purely illusory. As such, both its apparent existence and the emotions attached thereto do not affect one as they do the individual ego. And it is by this process of withdrawal, negation and complete detachment that the “consciousness of the unreality of the unreal brings awareness of the Real who is approached through the repeated recognition of what He is not (*neti neti*).” Thus the aesthetic experience, according to this view, lies but in the revelation to the mind of “the creative and retractive activity (*Līlā* and *māyasakti*) of Ishwara...wielding *māya* with perfect freedom and detachment.”² In Sri Aurobindo’s words, however, such a creative spiritual delight will at best be regarded as but “a godlike pastime”, for this alone cannot explain the full significance and nature of the spiritual delight of the creative being. Even if his creation is taken to be illusory, there must be some positive purpose behind this self-created illusion, some meaning which is greater than that of having sheer fun out of this illusory creation. Also, the whole truth behind this multiplicity of creation of individual objects is not fully explained—though it may be in a way explained away—by saying that “the objects lose in this state (i.e., the higher state of Ishwara-

1. Ibid., p. 103.

2. Ibid., p. 102.

hood) their empirical reality for him and appear in their universal emotive aspect that induces serene contemplation instead of realistic effects." On the contrary, the individuality of each objective creation may continue to be as perfectly enjoyable as its universality or apparent illusoriness itself, provided one regards this creative spiritual delight as not merely "a godlike pastime" or "the eternal spirit's eternal pastime - shaping and re-shaping", but "a great formative and illuminative power". In any case, as far as Sri Aurobindo is concerned, he would not subscribe to this *mayavada* aspect of Vedantic aesthetic realisation and experience but to the dynamically creative and illuminative aspects of it. For him the deeper truth of the cosmic creation lies expressed in the following verses of the ancient Rishi-poet—

"For who could live or breathe if there were not this delight of existence as the ether in which we dwell?" (*Taittiriya Upanishad II, 7*)¹

"From Delight all the beings are born, by Delight they exist and grow, to Delight they return." (*Taittiriya Upanishad III, 6*)²

"If one knows Him as Brahman the Non-Being, he becomes merely the non-existent. If one knows that Brahman Is, then is he known as the real in existence." (*Ibid., II 6*)³

His own realisation is but a confirmation of these profound ancient poetic-spiritual truths. In course of his exposition of the experience of "Reality Omnipresent" he, therefore, says, "The silent and the active Brahman are not different, opposite and irreconcilable entities, the one denying, the other affirming a cosmic illusion; they are one Brahman in two aspects, positive and negative, and each is necessary to the other. It is out of this Silence that the Word which creates the worlds for ever proceeds; for the Word expresses that which is self-hidden in the Silence. It is an eternal divine activity in innumerable cosmic systems. For the becomings of that activity derive their energies and their illimitable potency of variation and harmony from the impartial support of the immutable Being, its consent to this infinite fecundity of its own dynamic Nature."⁴ For him,

1. English translation by Sri Aurobindo vide *The Life Divine*, p. 86.

2. English translation by Sri Aurobindo vide *The Life Divine*, p. 86.

3. English translation by Sri Aurobindo vide *The Life Divine*, p. 26.

4. *The Life Divine*, op. cit., p. 27.

therefore, the ancient Vedantic theory of cosmic creation is best explicable in terms of an illuminative, creative, purposive delight. "Delight is existence", he says, "Delight is the secret of creation, Delight is the root of birth, Delight is the cause of remaining in existence, Delight is the end of birth and that into which creation ceases."¹

Thus it is against the background of some such subtle, dynamic and comprehensive Vedantic soul-experience that we can best understand the precise and true nature of the creative spiritual delight which is at the basis of the mystery of not only the cosmic creation but the poetic creation as well. Indeed, it is through the image of some supreme creative Artist or Poet constantly engaged in creation behind the universe that we best get some clue to the mystery of the process of cosmic creation, and not through the image of "that mere and perfect spirit described in the Upanishads, luminous, pure, sustaining the world but inactive in it, without sinews of energy, without flaw of duality, without scar of division, unique, identical, free from all appearance of relation and of multiplicity, - the pure self of the Advaitins, the inactive Brahman, the transcendent Silence."² It is in the light of the former rather than in that of the latter that we can best realise the world-existence as also all poetic or artistic creation in terms of the magnificent spiritual "Lila", which is as good as "the play, the child's joy, the poet's joy, the actor's joy, the mechanician's joy of the Soul of things eternally young, perpetually inexhaustible, creating and re-creating Himself in Himself for the sheer bliss of that self-creation, of that self-representation,—Himself the play, Himself the player, Himself the playground."³

The true or, at any rate, the highest poetic activity will be, therefore, according to Sri Aurobindo, the product of some such joy of the Supreme God-artist, and its supreme purpose or end is not achieved until it puts the reader or hearer in touch and relation with this extraordinary, all-vibrant, all-pervading delight felt by the Universal creative Spirit or Self and infinitely realised through inexhaustible acts of "a great formative and illuminative power." Consequently, the poetic word—apparently the sole visual medium of the poetic

1. Ibid., p. 95.

2. Ibid., p. 23

3. Ibid., p. 96

activity—plays its role in an equally large, vibrant, penetrating, intense manner. Exactly how this role is sought to be played is admirably described by Sri Aurobindo thus :

“...in all things that speech can express there are two elements, the outward or instrumental and the real or spiritual. In thought, for instance, there is the intellectual idea, that which the intelligence makes precise and definite to us, and the soul-idea, that which exceeds the intellectual and brings us into nearness or identity with the whole reality of the thing expressed. Equally in emotion, it is not the mere emotion itself the poet seeks, but the soul of the emotion, that in it for the delight of which the soul in us and the world desires or accepts emotional experience. So too with the poetical sense of objects, the poet’s attempt to embody in his speech truth of life or truth of Nature. It is this greater truth and its delight and beauty for which he is seeking, beauty which is truth and truth beauty and therefore a joy for ever, because it brings us the delight of the soul in behind the word; it is the spiritual excitement of a rhythmic voyage of self-discovery among the magic islands of form and name in these inner and outer worlds.”¹

The keynote is again the soul whose presence and stress cannot be altogether ignored whether it is the poetry of emotion or imagination or intellectual ideas or mere objective description which the poet apparently writes. Also, it is this very presence of the soul which imparts, as suggested above, the satisfying completeness of meaning to the famous inspired utterance of Keats: ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ through the simple addition of the joy-element to it. And all these miracles of beauty and truth and joy the poetic word is easily able to create because, as Sri Aurobindo suggests, it is the pregnant product of that creative all-vibrant soul which is not only “self-existent above the manifested or instrumental being...superior to birth and death”, but also subtly immanent in and interfused with, each and every atom of the suffering, mutable, manifested material existence—hence the peculiar spiritual delight felt by the poet in and through his act of creation, whatever its external substance and form. And because it, thus, succeeds in effecting a happy marriage between the reality of the matter below and the reality of the Spirit above—usually regarded as irreconcilable both by

1. *F.P.*, pp. 21-22.

ascetics and materialists that it is able to communicate to the responsive reader—the *Saṅgīta*—as the Sanskrit aestheticians so appropriately and felicitously called him—the same peculiar delight of an abiding, vibrant, extraordinary nature as the poet-seer originally felt during his act of creation.

■ ■ ■

Chapter 5

POETRY AS "THE MANTRA OF THE REAL"

It is clear from the study of *The Future Poetry* that Sri Aurobindo would have us remember, from the first, the true, which is also the highest, aim and essence of poetry. "What is the highest power we demand from poetry; or, —let us put it more largely and get nearer the root of the matter, —what may be the nature of poetry, its essential law..?"¹ This is the fundamental question he would have us solve, first and last. All else can but follow this primary purpose. If we wish to make the best of the poetic activity, we must first know "its spirit, its inner aim, its deeper law",² for knowing this also means knowing the very highest possibility and use of poetry. It is this knowledge which will save both the writer and the reader of it from falling into false traps and side issues which lie on the path even here. What is more, taking our stand firmly on this vantage-point we may gain a quite full view of the entire range, mode and purpose of this form of human expression and also develop a more catholic, comprehensive and enlightened attitude towards it than is usually the case with us. But above all, it is through this means, more than any other, that we are able to see, says Sri Aurobindo, "how out of that arises the possibility of its use as the *mantra* of the Real."³

"The *mantra* of the Real" it is this phrase which, according to him, embodies the highest achievement of poetry. Indeed, if we accept the truth that poetry is essentially an activity and expression of the spirit, the soul, and if the innate bent of the soul is towards the Divine Truth, the Divine Delight and Beauty, in brief, an intimate and all-vibrant integral experience of the Divine Reality, it follows naturally that the very ultimate stage of the poetic achievement or realisation can be reached only when the poet is able to sing out to us in words, clear and bold, "the *mantra* of the Real". Now, what is a *mantra*? It is one of those words in our language for which an adequate English equivalent is

1. *F.P.*, p. 12.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

almost impossible to find. Ordinarily, it is translated into the English word as incantation or magic; and indeed, there are critics in the West who from ancient times have not only looked upon poetry as a sort of incantation or magic but also felt and stated that the highest reach of poetry is attainable only when its words and rhythms and images and ideas are all dissolved or subtly transformed through some mysterious power into a form of incantation, and thereby acquire an irresistible, haunting power over the hearer's or reader's mind. The experience may be said to go back to the very earliest times of human history and appears to have become fairly articulate in the Platonic days, for when Plato spoke of the persons who were "possessed by the Muses" and composed poems as though they were "inspired" by some "frenzy", he was, in fact, referring to some such art of incantation into which poetry dissolved itself. As David Daiches says, referring to the Platonic conception of the poet, "The poet was a possessed creature, not using language in the way that normal human beings do, but speaking in a divinely inspired frenzy."¹ It was, at any rate, in this frame of mind or consciousness that the prophetic poets delivered the word of God. This was a common enough notion in early stages of civilization. Such a view of the poet Plato suggests first in a passage in his *Phaedrus* and later develops at great length in his *Ion* where the poet is presented as the inspired rhapsodist through whom God Himself speaks. He is generally represented as a man lacking in art and even any volition of his own, a passive vehicle merely. Says Socrates to Ion, "The gift which you possess....is not an art, but....an inspiration; there is a divinity moving you, like that contained in the stone which Euripides calls a magnet....all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems, not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed....the poet is a light and winged and holy thing and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him; when he has not attained to this state, he is powerless and is unable to utter his oracles....not by art does the poet sing, but by power divine....the poets are only the interpreters of the Gods by whom they are severally possessed...."²

1. *Critical Approaches to Literature*, 1959, p. 6.

2. Quoted in Daiches's book, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.

Now though the word 'incantation' or 'magic' is not used here, yet we may safely assume it to be implied by Plato from the way in which a poet, supposed to be "possessed" by some "power divine" or by the Gods, is described as composing his beautiful poems so as to cast a kind of spell upon his audience. According to this conception, the poet's activity is taken to be one of casting a spell or magical effect upon the audience, for the time being at any rate, through the medium of the word he utters. And this may be taken to be equivalent to his uttering an incantation or *mantra*, specially when he sings as if possessed by some "power divine", and therefore, it is not he who sings or speaks but "God himself is the speaker"¹ through him. If, as we shall see soon, some of the distinctive features of *mantric* poetry are that it should aim at setting up a direct relationship or communication between the gods or the divine powers above and the poetic soul, and through him the listener's or reader's soul, below, and that the effect of the poetic utterance of such an experience is to cast everybody concerned under some potent, mysterious, haunting spell or charm so that at the highest or intensest point of the working of this charm, everything else is forgotten and only the vibrant fusion of the human and divine souls becomes effectively real, it may be safely supposed that the kind of inspired, incantatory, "frenzied" expression by the poet to which Plato refers comes sufficiently close to the *mantric* expression in poetry, according to the ancient Indian tradition.

It is significant that in the earliest stages of human civilization when, as already quoted, "the poet and the priest were united originally in the same person" and "the poet was he who was conscious of the world of spirit as well as that of sense, and was the ambassador of the gods to men", we had some of the ideal conditions in which poetry could best flourish as *mantra*. And it is accepted both in the East and in the West that this kind of poetry is the poet's highest achievement and it was in this kind of poetic composition that he came to be looked upon as the "seer" or Rishi. But as soon as the functions of the poet and the priest begin to be separated, and still later on in human history when the poet as the "seer" becomes secondary to the "maker", and his office is reduced to that of the entertainer from that of the

1. Ibid., p. 7.

teacher, we naturally perceive an inevitable decline in the production and appreciation of poetry as *mantra*. What is more, as civilisation and sophistication advance and we reach the modern intellectual and scientific age, the disappearance of mantric poetry seems to be almost complete.

However, even in modern times we have some English critics like Abercrombie and C. Day Lewis who once again remind us of this important and high function of poetry, and thereby seek to restore, as far as possible, the incantatory power of poetry.

"What, then", asks Abercrombie, "is the first thing which we require of all poetry not merely in order to be great, but to exist at all?"¹ And quite at once he replies, "I will call it, compendiously, 'incantation'; the power of using words so as to produce in us a sort of enchantment; and by that I mean a power not merely to charm and delight, but to kindle our minds into unusual vitality, exquisitely aware both of things and of the connexions of things."² This power of incantation is not at all a matter of technique or craftsmanship, continues Abercrombie, and yet it is in and through the quality of words, first of all, and more than anything else, that the critical mind will be able to lay hold on this peculiar power of incantation which is the hall-mark of all true and great poetry. But then, as he says, "we do not require an absolute enchantment in every phrase we read, even in the finest poetry".³ Nevertheless, "the poets have an art of making us expect the magical phrase; and when it comes, it casts its enchantment over the whole surrounding texture of language."⁴ Indeed, as he says further, "unless it does come, and come often to keep our minds invigorated by its release, even from common words, of uncommon energy of meaning, we begin to murmur: 'This may be very sincere and painstaking, but it is not *poetry*'."⁵ Abercrombie, thus, makes it quite clear that the very essential and primary power of a true poet is the power of discovering "the magical phrase" and of "keeping our minds invigorated by its release, even from common

1. *The Idea of Great Poetry*, 1926., p. 18.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

words, of uncommon energy of meaning''. And in order to reinforce his point, and drive it concretely home to our understanding he gives us a few very well-chosen, even familiar illustrations from Chaucer, Herrick, Shakespeare and Giles Fletcher. When we go through these we get a clear concrete notion of what he means by this power of incantation or enchantment in poetry. A single example of it from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* will be sufficient here for our purpose. It is the night of prodigies in Rome, and Casca whose mind is already agitated by thoughts of treason tells us how that night he met on the way a lion

"who glazed upon me and went surly by."

"There was never", comments Abercrombie, "any other lion quite like that. And the sight of its mysterious demeanour has been made over to us in perpetuity. The very sense of Casca's appalled encounter is absolute in us; Shakespeare's art has so enchanted us, that we become, for a moment, what he became."¹

Abercrombie's argument is that by means of "the magical phrase", the incantatory word, the poet seeks to recreate, and not merely describe, the state of mind in which he found himself at that moment, in the reader himself. It is something like a vigorous, vital transference of the state of mind from one person to another, i.e. from the creator to the recipient. Then there is another important thing which happens, as a result of it, at the same time. Says Abercrombie, "There are, naturally, infinite occasions for the poet's incantation; but its purpose is always the same. It may be giving us simply a moment of sensation; but it will make the moment individual, exquisite, unique...the poet's words not only make the whole fact start alive in our minds; they are electric with the subtle distinction of the moment in which the fact occurs, stored with those delicate and profound reverberations which make the fact unique. For the facts we are speaking of are experiences; and experiences are always unique: they occur in some particular person's mind, in some particular sequence of other experiences."² And exploring the matter thus, Abercrombie leads us on to what he takes to be the poet's chief business. He says: "Whatever the nature of his topic, the poet's business is always the same. He must, out of subtly

1. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-23.

adjusted sound and sense of words, contrive such a texture of intensities and complexities of meaning, of unsuspected filaments of fine allusion and suggestion, as will enable those gossamers to capture and convey into our minds just those fleeting, gleaming qualities of experience which elude the hold of everyday straightforward language. For these are the very qualities which give to each moment of experience its unique distinction; and the words that can securely convey them are magical words, for they are truly creative."¹

To Abercrombie, therefore, the poet's real creative power lies in the ability to discover and get hold of those magical words and phrases by force of which he is able to communicate, nay directly transmit to the reader, the unique, individual, exquisite, vibrant experiences occurring at a particular moment in his own particular individual mind. The poet's power of incantation lies, thus, in creating a unique, individual, vibrant psychological state in the reader or listener by means of words and phrases which Abercrombie calls "magical". Its process or mode is verbal no doubt but the aim is to induce a particular, unique state of mind in which the peculiar individual experience of the creative poet is easily and directly transmitted to the recipient's mind with all that subtle "texture of intensities and complexities of meaning, of unsuspected filaments of fine allusion and suggestion" which inevitably lies embedded in the core of every unique experience of man. And this "magical infection of our minds with the poet's mind by means of language, is the first thing", says Abercrombie, "poetry must be capable of, in order to exist at all" and therefore, "to accept the incantation—the re-creation in us of another man's experience,—is to make our first acknowledgement of the presence of poetry."²

Though C. Day Lewis is not so detailed in the exposition of the incantatory or magical power of poetry as Abercrombie, yet his brief observations are no less germane to our purpose, inasmuch as he, too, believes that poetry has "its roots in incantation" and that "its effect has always been to create a state of mind . . ."³ And although the modern times seem to be quite alien to the growth of poetry which "has its roots in incantation",

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

3. *A Hope for Poetry*, 1945, p. 30.

yet he does not consider the situation to be so bleak as to lose hope altogether. On the contrary, even in this age of science and propaganda the magical poetic power can assert itself and ultimately triumph against all odds making use of those very properties which seem to be alien to the creation of poetry. "Poetry", as he says, "was born from magic: it grew up with religion: it lived through the age of reason:"¹ and there is no reason why it should "die in the century of propaganda".² Indeed, it is, according to him, not "death, perhaps, but a self-defensive cataleptic trance"³ in which it seems to be fallen today. And though it would appear that it has hardly any hope of "making itself heard in such a pandemonium of slogans, national anthems, headlines. . . . straight talks, loud-speakers, manifestoes, monkey business, madhouse gossip and high-explosive ideals"⁴ and it would seem that in a 'scientific' age "the flower of poetry must wither",⁵ yet it need not be so inasmuch as "it is possible for poetry", C. Day Lewis continues to say, "to steal the thunder of science, to absorb these trivial business incantations and turn them to its own uses".⁶

When we now turn to Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of poetry as *mantra*, we find that in his large spiritual utterance, the whole thing takes on a new intensity and depth of meaning. The English word 'incantation', particularly as interpreted by Abercrombie and C. Day Lewis, falls quite short of the potencies and depths and complexities of meaning which lie packed in the Sanskrit word *mantra*. And no wonder, for it is in the rich ancient Vedic sense and usage and not in accordance with the Western conception of either ancient or modern times that he interprets the term to us. He takes the *mantra* "as the highest, intensest revealing form of poetic thought and expression"⁷ and in this he has the sanction of the Vedic poets themselves. As he says, "what the Vedic poets meant by the *mantra* was an inspired and revealed seeing and visioned thinking, attended by a realisation,

1. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

7. *F.P.*, p. 280.

to use the ponderous but necessary modern word, of some inmost truth of God and self and man and Nature and cosmos and life and thing and thought and experience and deed. It was a thinking that came on the wings of a great soul rhythm, *chhandas*. For the seeing could not be separated from the hearing; it was one act. Nor could the living of the truth in oneself which we mean by realisation, be separated from either, for the presence of it in the soul and its possession of the mind must precede or accompany in the creator or human channel that expression of the inner sight and hearing which takes the shape of the luminous word. The mantra is born through the heart and shaped or massed by the thinking mind into a chariot of that godhead of the Eternal of whom the truth seen is a face or a form. And in the mind too of the fit outward hearer who listens to the word of the poet seer, these three must come together, if our word is a real mantra; the sight of the inmost truth must accompany the hearing, the possession of the inmost spirit of it by the mind and its coming home to the soul must accompany or follow immediately upon the rhythmic message of the word and the mind's sight of the Truth. That may sound a rather mystic account of the matter, but substantially there could hardly be a more complete description of the birth and effect of the inspired and revealing word, and it might be applied, though usually on a more lowered scale than was intended by the Vedic Rishis, to all the highest outbursts of really great poetry. But poetry is the mantra only when it is the voice of the inmost truth and is couched in the highest power of the very rhythm and speech of that truth. And the ancient poets of the Veda and Upanishads claimed to be uttering the mantra because always it was this inmost and almost occult truth of things which they strove to see and hear and speak and because they believed themselves to be using or finding its innate soul rhythms and the sacrificial speech of it cast up by the divine Agni, the sacred Fire¹ in the heart of man. The mantra, in other words, is a direct and most heigh-

1. The Western reader may get some idea of this sacred fire from the following lines of Matthew Arnold :

"We cannot kindle when we will
The fire which in the heart resides,
The spirit bloweth and is still,
In mystery our soul abides";

—*Morality*

tened, an intense and most divinely burdened rhythmic word which embodies an intuitive and revelatory inspiration and ensouls the mind with the sight and the presence of the very self, the inmost reality of things and with its truth and with the divine soul-forms, the God-heads which are born from the living Truth. Or, let us say, it is the supreme rhythmic language which seizes hold upon all that is finite and brings into each the light and voice of its own infinite."¹

The quotation had to be given in full so that the mantra, as it is to be truly understood, should be clearly and variously driven home to us. It is doubtful whether anybody else has defined or described it better and more fully than Sri Aurobindo. And here is a detailed and poetically vivid and precise and revealing description of the way in which it operates upon the recipient of the mantra —

As when the mantra sinks in Yoga's ear,
Its message enters stirring the blind brain
And keeps in the dim ignorant cells its sound;
The hearer understands a form of words
And, musing on the index thought it holds;
He strives to read it with the labouring mind,
But finds bright hints, not the embodied truth :
Then, falling silent in himself to know
He meets the deeper listening of his soul :
The word repeats itself in rhythmic strains :
Thought, vision, feeling, sense, the body's self
Are seized unalterably and he endures
An ecstasy and an immortal change;
He feels a Wideness and becomes a Power
All knowledge rushes on him like a sea :
Transmuted by the white spiritual ray
He walks in naked heavens of joy and calm,
Sees the God-face and hears transcendent speech....²

It is rather strange that no Sanskrit literary critic has considered it necessary to refer to the kind of poetry known as mantra. All possible arguments and counter-arguments have been advanced to explain *Rasa* (aesthetic taste), *Alankara* (embellishments of figures of speech), *Dhvani* (suggestion), *Guna* (excellences), *Dosa* (faults) etc. and all possible subtleties demonstrated to enumerate these as well as the types of drama, poetry, style, hero,

1. Ibid., pp. 280-81.

2. Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*: Book IV, Canto 3, p. 426, one-volume edition.

heroine etc. but nowhere does one come across the kind of composition which was long known as *mantra* in the Vedic and Upanishadic poetry. Probably it was because the very connotation of the word *Kavi* or poet had undergone a radical change during the period of classical Sanskrit and, as Sri Aurobindo says, it came to be applied in classical Sanskrit to "any maker of verse or even of prose", but "in the Vedic it meant the poet seer who saw and found the inspired word of his vision".¹ And as the Sanskrit literary critics mostly belonged to and concerned themselves with the period of classical Sanskrit, so they hardly looked upon the poet as a "seer who saw and found the inspired word of his vision", or even bothered to explore the possibility of the kind of poetry which "embodies an intuitive and revelatory inspiration and ensouls the mind with the sight and the presence of the very self, the inmost reality of things and with its truth and with the divine soul-forms of it...." Nevertheless, this serious *lacuna* in Sanskrit literary criticism is something inexcusable. For Sri Aurobindo, however, who from the first looks upon poetry with the same vision and outlook as it was regarded in the Vedic times, and declares in unambiguous terms that "the true creator of poetry, as also its true hearer, is the soul", it was inevitable that he should not only think of *mantra* as the highest and greatest poetic utterance but also give us as clear and convincing a rationale of it as it is possible for the human mind to understand. The fact is that the mantra can never be a product of the human mind, however great and brilliant, nor is it accessible even to the highest poetic imagination as we usually understand it. It is the product of what Sri Aurobindo calls the "Overmind". "The *mantra*", he says, "...is what comes from the overmind inspiration. Its characteristics are a language that says infinitely more than the mere sense of the words seems to indicate, a rhythm that means even more than the language and is born out of the Infinite and disappears into the Infinite and the power to convey not merely some mental, vital or physical contents or indications or values of the thing it speaks of, but its value and figure in some fundamental and original consciousness, which is behind them all."² That is to say, it is something

1. *F.P.*, footnote, p. 39.

2. *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, 3rd Series, p. 97.

essentially mystical and spiritual, although it need not always operate upon what we usually take to be spiritual things and experiences of the Divine. As quoted earlier, it is concerned with the realisation "of some inmost truth of God and self and man and Nature and cosmos and life and thing and thought and experience and deed". That is to say, its subjects and their range are unlimited. It may "seize hold upon all that is finite;" only it "brings into each the light and voice of its own infinite". As he says at another place, "To arrive at the mantra he (i.e. the poet) may start from the colour of a rose, or the power or beauty of a character, or the splendour of an action, or go away from all these into his own secret soul and its most hidden movements."¹ The starting-point may be, therefore, anything which belongs to the outer or the inner or supraphysical and transcendental world. But "the one thing needful is that he should be able to go beyond the word or image he uses or the form of the thing he sees, not be limited by them, but get into the light of that which they have the power to reveal and flood them with it until they overflow with its suggestions or seem even to lose themselves and disappear into the revelation".² That is to say, the poet of the *mantra* must be able to penetrate the very soul of the thing or image or word and invariably reveal the very "inmost reality of things". However, the ultimate result of the mantric experience is, as in the case of Plato's "possessed" or "frenzied" rhapsodist or Abercrombie's creator of "incantation" or "enchantment", the discovery of the potent, luminous, vibrant word. And the discovery of such a word is not something mental or imaginative but an actual seeing of it. As Sri Aurobindo tells us again, the poet-seer "...sees.... and finds the revealing word not merely the adequate and the effective, but the illumined and illuminating, the inspired and inevitable word, which compels us to see also".³ And yet the whole process operating behind such a discovery of the "luminous", "the inspired and inevitable word" is a very complex and subtle one and keeps the whole integral being of the poet as well as the hearer engaged. For, though the *mantra* is visibly, almost physically received in the form of words, yet it

1. *F.P.*, p. 48.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 48

3. *F.P.*, p. 33.

is not a pack of words only. The words are but the interfused embodiments of "an inspired and revealed seeing and visioned thinking", attended by a realisation of the inmost reality of the thing concerned. The seeing is "revealed" and the thinking "visioned" and what is more, the thinking comes "on the wings of a great soul rhythm"; and "the seeing could not be separated from the hearing"; it is "one act". And all these various subtle swift acts of our receptive organs are actually "realised" experiences. As Sri K. D. Sethna says, quoting a compendiously felicitous and luminously revealing line from Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*, "Sight's sound-waves breaking from the soul's great deeps"¹—which is itself a striking example of mantric utterance—, "...the poet's act of a seeing is simultancously an act of hearing. They are not two processes really—the sight-substance comes fused with the sound-form, the vision is its own word, the right manifesting word which is not just "transmissive" but "incarnative" embodying with a living intimacy and concrete directness the gleaming stuff and stir of the soul's revelatory contact with reality."²

We, thus, find that at least three main activities or processes must get involved, compounded and fused together here before the "seen" or "revealed" word would become "a real *mantra*": "the sight of the inmost spirit of it by the mind and its coming to the soul must accompany or follow immediately upon the rhythmic message of the Word and the mind's sight of the Truth". That is to say, it is but a well-integrated soul, dynamic on all its instrumental faculties and organs as well, which can become the fit medium of the mantric expression, and the true creator of the mantric poetry. As such, the truth which we get from the *mantra* is not merely some local, particular truth of the thing or experience visibly expressed but some force or form of the Truth itself, the very Supreme Reality. That is, indeed, the very essence of the *mantra*, and it is this which above everything else not only distinguishes it from all other kinds and qualities of poetry but raises it to the highest level of human utterance. Moreover, the process of its birth is not something purely human, for there is the direct and simultaneous working and intervention by

1. *Savitri* Book 4 Canto 4 p. 435 line 28, one-volume Edn.

2. *Mother India*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, April 1955.

the Divine Power. That is why Sri Aurobindo says that the *mantra* in poetry is "that rhythmic speech which, as the Veda puts it, rises at once from the heart of the seer and from the distant home of the Truth."¹ It is obviously a dual movement linking the human with the ultimate Reality. For the purpose in the *mantra* is, as suggested before, to reach up to some integral truth above, through the word, the divine movement, the form of thought proper to the reality which, as Mr. Cousins² excellently says, 'lies in the apprehension of a something stable behind the instability of word and deed, something that is a reflection of the fundamental passion of humanity for something beyond itself, something that is a dim foreshadowing of the divine urge which is prompting all creation to unfold itself and to rise out of its limitations towards the Godlike possibilities'.³

This is the fundamental motive and impulse behind the birth of the *mantra* -to reach out to, and lay hold on, "a something stable behind the instability of word and deed".

As regards its mode of expression, Sri Aurobindo tells us that three things are simultaneously indispensable. "The *mantra*, poetic expression of the deepest spiritual reality, is only possible when three highest intensities of poetic speech meet and become indissolubly one, a highest intensity of rhythmic movement, a highest intensity of verbal form and thought-substance, of style, and a highest intensity of the soul's vision of truth. All great poetry comes about by a unison of these three elements; it is the insufficiency of one or another which makes the inequalities in the work of even the greatest poets; and it is the failure of some one element which is the cause of their lapses....But it is only at a certain highest level of the fused intensities that the *mantra* becomes possible."⁴

And when, thus, as a result of these triple simultaneous movements of the highest intensity it becomes possible, it strikes upon our ear and consciousness

1. *F.P.*, p. 11.

2. It was James Cousins' book *New Ways in English Literature* which originally prompted Sri Aurobindo to come out with the series of articles under the title of *The Future Poetry*.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

with a music which is of the utmost spiritual resonance. "It is where the metrical movement remains as a base, but either enshrines and contains or is itself contained and floats in an element of greater music which exceeds it and yet brings out all its possibilities, that the music fit for the *mantra* makes itself audible."¹ Indeed, it is "the triumph of the spirit over the difficulties and limitations of its physical instrument".² Naturally, it is not with the help of just the physical ear that we can really listen to such a celestial music. On the contrary, "Its listener seems to be that eternal spirit whom the Upanishads speak of as the ear of the ear, he who listens to all hearings; and 'behind the instabilities of word and speech' it is the inevitable harmonies of his own thought and vision for which he is listening."³ That is to say, in the ultimate stage of the experience, the inner spiritual listener attending to that "greater music" discovers that "it is the inevitable harmonies of his own thought and vision for which he is listening". Thus in the *mantra* the human soul below gets most harmoniously and completely identified with the eternal spirit above.

Similarly, its verbal style is also of an extraordinary, superhuman nature, and hardly subject to any rule or particular form of expression. Outwardly it may have quite a variety of forms and styles but the real pressure comes from what is spiritually known as the Word itself, for the original home of Truth sends down Its own verbal form and the physical instruments of human expression have only to achieve the capacity and power of unhindered transmission. The verbal intensity with which the *mantra* is inevitably filled, says Sri Aurobindo, "belongs to no particular style, depends on no conceivable formula of diction. It may be the height of the decorative imaged style as often we find it in Kalidasa or Shakespeare; it may be that height of bare and direct expression where language seems to be used as a scarcely felt vaulting-board for a leap into the infinite; it may be the packed intensity of language which uses either the bare or the imaged form at will, but fills every word with its utmost possible rhythmic and thought suggestion. But in itself it depends on none of these things; it is not a style, but poetic style itself, the Word; it creates and

1. *F.P.*, p. 30.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

carries with it its elements rather than is created by them. Whatever its outward forms, it is always the one fit style for the mantra."¹

Such being some of the graspable facts about the *mantra*, it is evident that it is the very "highest inspiration" which can call it forth: "the intrinsic word, the spiritual *mantra*".² Also, we must not confuse the *mantra* with any philosophic, intellectual truth and knowledge. It is not, as Sri Aurobindo says, "in its substance or form poetic enunciation of a philosophic truth". On the contrary, it is "but the rhythmic revelation or intuition arising out of the soul's sight of God and Nature and the world and the inner truth occult to the outward eye—of all that peoples it, the secrets of their life and being".³ It is "the voice of the inmost truth and is couched in the highest power of the very rhythm and speech of that truth".⁴ And "at the highest he (i.e. the poet) himself disappears into sight; the personality of the seer is lost in the eternity of the vision, and the spirit of all seems alone to be there speaking out sovereignly its own secrets."⁵ We could not have a more precise and concise and pregnant description of the *mantra* than this. Born out of the "soul's sight" ultimately in the *mantra*, "the personality of the seer is lost in the eternity of the vision". Prof. V. K. Gokak rightly says, 'This disappearance of the seer in his vision is more significant than the negative capability, the annihilation of the poet's identity which Keats describes in one of his letters or the 'depersonalisation' that T. S. Eliot speaks of'.⁶

The poet of the *mantra* is, thus, essentially an inspired spiritual being through whom "the Spirit of all seems to be there speaking out sovereignly its own secrets". Here, too, as Prof. Gokak says in the same article, we must not confuse this "Spirit", that is to Sri Aurobindo a shining Reality and not a mere figure of speech, with some Romantic vision of Nature who, according to Arnold, takes the pen from Wordsworth's hand in the

1. *F.P.*, p. 38.

2. *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, 3rd Series, p. 77.

3. *F.P.*, p. 46.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

6. *Sri Aurobindo and Aesthetics, Mother India*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry October 1953, p. 6.

most moving passages and seems to write herself. Still we may feel inclined to think that the mantric poet, being ultimately the child of such a Spirit, is like the inspired rhapsodist through whom God Himself speaks, as pointed out by Plato. But this, too, is merely a superficial resemblance, for whereas the inspired rhapsodist of Plato's description is a man lacking in art and even any volition of his own, - "the mind is no longer in him; when he has not attained to this state, he is powerless and is unable to utter his oracles. . . ." as Plato said - , the poet of the *mantra*, though outwardly passively and silently open to the Word, the Spirit, the home of Truth above, is, nevertheless, inwardly a fully conscious, dynamic, integrally attuned spiritual being himself, and what is more, is at the greatest and intensest possible spiritual heights of luminous creative seeing, hearing and utterance. It is no "frenzy" or "madness" which seizes hold upon him and though he, too, becomes, for the time being, a being "possessed" by some mysterious occult power, he is not thrown into some cataleptic trance but remains fully conscious spiritually within, and, for that reason, is able to transmit the very "inmost truth of God and self and man and Nature and cosmos and life and thought and experience and deed". Also, his range of seeing and hearing and expression is all-comprehensive and not confined merely to things usually known as divine. And whatever the inmost truth of the thing seen or heard, it becomes at once a matter of self-realisation, a part and parcel of his inmost spiritual experience. That is why, the *mantra* he utters comes to exercise so much power over his listener or reader. As Sri Aurobindo points out, "The Vedic poets regarded their poetry as *mantras*, they were the vehicles of their own realisations and could become vehicles of realisation for others."¹ Being illuminations of the Word, the Light, they could immediately touch the deepest spiritual chords of one's being. They were instruments of an extraordinary occult power and could cause unusual occult experiences in the recipient, too, if properly received and recited. The Vedic and Upanishadic *mantras* are, therefore, not words but concealed, packed powers. You repeat them in the true manner and spirit—the true manner and spirit depending upon the status of being you have reached—and the occult force hidden

1. *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, 3rd Series, p. 292.

in them surrounds and seizes hold upon you from all sides like a living presence and begins to cause illuminations and realisations in you, too, in consonance with your capacity for receptivity.

It is, thus, clear from the above observations that it is the highest and intensest utterance of one's deepest possible spiritual experience or realisation which alone can take the form and substance of mantra. Here, therefore, the three important factors involved are all spiritual the truth seen, heard and realised in its own appropriate verbal, rhythmic and imaged form, the creator-seer of such a truth, and the moved, illumined recipient-hearer or reader of it. These three factors combine together to give the *mantra* of our Indian conception the Vedic and Upanishadic conception, to be more exact—that unique quality and power which it usually possesses, and separate it so sharply from the “inspired” poetry of the ancient Greek, Platonic conception and the poetry of verbal and psychological “incantation” of the modern Abercrombiesque or C. Day Lewis's conception.

Now the vital question which arises which is, in fact, quite initially raised by Sri Aurobindo himself in *The Future Poetry*—is whether such a mantric poetry is possible to-day or tomorrow, particularly in the English language. It is evident from a careful reading of this book—indeed, this seems to be one of the primary reasons why he wrote the book itself—that Sri Aurobindo has little doubt in his own mind that the thing is not only possible but inevitable, if not today, at least in some distant future when the consciousness of the human race, including the Western and the British, gets firmly and progressively as well as creatively well-established in the Spirit, the psychic-being. And if perchance the British poets themselves are not found quite ready for that task today or tomorrow, it is more than possible that it will be increasingly undertaken and accomplished by the Indian creative spirits using English as their medium of poetic expression. Nevertheless, it is with much modesty in the language that he expresses this view in the introductory pages of *The Future Poetry*. As already quoted in the third chapter, he says: “The issues of recent activity are still doubtful and it would be rash to make any confident prediction; but there is one possibility which...is at least interesting and may be fruitful to search and consider. That possibility is

the discovery of a closer approximation to what we might call the *mantra* in poetry....¹ And when he remarks that "poetry in the past has done that in moments of supreme elevation"², he is most probably referring to the Vedic and Upanishadic times; and when he says that "in the future there seems to be some chance of its making it a more conscious aim and steadfast endeavour",³ he is probably thinking particularly of the English poetry, as the subsequent pages of the book indicate. Here, both the epithets 'conscious' and 'steadfast' are significant and suggest that the thing is not unlikely and may be even deliberately attempted. In the concluding chapter of *The Future Poetry*, however, when he has already examined some of the distinctive achievements of the great Romantic poets and such modern poets as Whitman, A. E., Carpenter, Tagore, etc. he makes his view on this issue explicit enough: "The poetry of the future has to solve, if the suggestions I have made are sound, a problem new to the art of poetic speech, an utterance of the deepest soul of man and of the universal spirit in things, not only with another and a more complete vision, but in the very inmost language of the self-experience of the soul and the sight of the spiritual mind. The attempt to speak in poetry the inmost things of the spirit or to use a psychical and spiritual seeing other than that of the more outward imagination and intelligence has indeed been made before, but for the most part, and except in rare moments of an unusually inspired speech it has used some kind of figure or symbol more than a direct language of inmost experience; or else, where it has used such a language, it has been within the limited province of a purely inward experience as in the lofty philosophic and spiritual poetry of the Upanishads, the expression of a peculiar psychic feeling of Nature common in far eastern poets or the poetic setting of mystic states or of an especial religious emotion and experience of which we have a few examples in Europe and many in the literature of Western Asia and India. It is a different and much larger creative and interpretative movement that we now see in the first stages, an expansion of the inner way of vision to outer no less than to inner things, to all that is subjective

1. *F.P.*, p. 11.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

to us and all that is objective, a seeing by a closer identity in the self of man with the self of things and life and Nature and of all that meets him in the universe.”¹

Naturally, for such an attempt to be successful certain conditions have got to be fulfilled, and Sri Aurobindo rightly draws our attention to them, so that we should have no doubt whatsoever as to what is required in the human situation before appreciable success can be achieved in this direction. “The first condition,” says he, “of the complete emergence of this new poetic inspiration and this significance of poetic speech must be the completion of an as yet only initial spiritualised turn of our general human feeling and intelligence. At present the human mind is occupied in passing the borders of two kingdoms. It is emerging out of a period of active and mostly materialistic intellectualism towards a primary intuitive seeking to which the straining of the intellect after truth has been brought in the very drive of its own impulse by a sort of slipping over unexpected borders. . . . There is a vitalistic intuitivism sometimes taking a more subjective form, sometimes a more objective. . . . (but) cannot get through its own rather thick and often violent lustres and colours to a finer and truer spiritual vision. There is an emotional and sensational psychical intuitivism half emerging from and half entangled in the vitalistic motive. . . . There is a purer and more delicate psychic intuition with a spiritual issue, that which has been brought by the Irish poets into English literature. The poetry of Whitman and his successors has been that of life, but of life broadened, raised and illumined by a strong intellectual intuition of the self of man and the large soul of humanity. And at the subtlest elevation of all that has yet been reached stands or rather wings and floats in a high intermediate region, the poetry of Tagore, not in the complete spiritual light, and amid an air shot with its seekings and glimpses. . . . The wide success and appeal of his poetry is indeed one of the most significant signs of the tendency of the mind of the age. At the same time one feels that none of these things are at all the whole of what we are seeking or the definite outcome and issue. That can only be assured when a supreme light of the spirit, a perfect joy and satisfaction of the subtlety and complexity of a finer psychic experience and a wide strength and amplitude

1. *F.P.*, pp. 398-99.

of the life soul sure of the earth and open to the heavens have met, found each other and fused together in the sovereign unity of some great poetic discovery and utterance."¹

Indeed, the condition laid down at the end of this passage is of such a nature that, as things stand at present and are likely to be in the near future, it is rather difficult, if not quite impossible, for the Western sensibility, however refined and deepened, to fulfil. This is probably the reason why Sri Aurobindo himself has to throw out the hint: "It is possible that it may be rather in eastern languages and by the genius of eastern poets that there will come the first discovery of this perfection."² And no wonder. For "the East has always had in its temperament a greater constant nearness to the spiritual and psychic sight and experience and it is only a more perfect turning of this sight on the whole life of man to accept and illuminate that is needed for the realisation of that for which we are still waiting."³ But then the West, too, has some peculiar advantages of its own, which can be more fruitfully tapped by the poets of the future. Its chief advantage is that "though it is only now emerging not so much into the spiritual light as into an outer half-lit circle and though it is hampered by an excessive outward, intellectual and vital pressure, it has at present a more widely ranging thought and a more questioning eye...."⁴ Nevertheless, in the ultimate analysis of things, it is, as Sri Aurobindo suggests, "the shock upon each other of the oriental and occidental mentalities, on the one side the large spiritual mind and inward eye turned upon self and eternal realities, on the other the free enquiry of thought and the courage of the life energy assailing the earth and its problems, that is creating the future and must be the parent of the poetry of the future."⁵ That is to say, the *mantric* poetry of the future need not be the outcome of a mere "spiritual and psychic sight and experience... turned upon self and eternal realities" alone. On the contrary, for it to grow in the new age which is dawning upon us through the phases of the scientific and intellectual and vital pressures upon human and all earthly

1. *F.P.*, pp. 399-400.

2. *F.P.*, p. 401.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 401.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 401.

5. *Ibid.* p. 401.

life, it becomes a matter of fundamental necessity that "the whole of life and of the world and Nature" be "seen, fathomed, accepted"; only it is to be "seen in the light of man's deepest spirit, fathomed by the fathoming of the self of man and the large self of the universe, accepted in the sense of its inmost and not only its more outward truth, the discovery of the divine reality within it and of man's own divine possibilities".¹ It is, as Sri Aurobindo says with a sense of clear-seeing conviction, "this....delivering vision for which our minds are seeking and it is this vision of which the future poetry must find the inspiring aesthetic form and the revealing language".²

We are witnessing today tremendous changes in the material life and thought of man. But the spiritual pressure from behind and above is no less great. No wonder if we, particularly the older and more conservative races and peoples, find it difficult to adjust ourselves to these big, rapid changes. That is why Sri Aurobindo has the feeling that "it may be that some of the old nations that have been the leaders of the past and the old literatures that have been hitherto the chosen vehicles of strong poetic creation may prove incapable of holding the greater breath of the new spirit and be condemned to fall into decadence. It may be that we shall have to look for the future creation to new poetical literatures that are not yet born or are yet in their youth and first making or, though they have done something in the past, have still to reach their greatest voice and compass".³ Unfortunately, "these and other signs of age are not absent from the greater European literary tongues, and at such a stage it becomes difficult and a critical experiment to attempt at once a transformation of spirit and of the inner cast of poetic language".⁴ However, the situation is not altogether desperate for the old literatures and languages. For, as Sri Aurobindo hopefully points out, "There is yet in the present ferment and travail a compelling force of new potentiality, a saving element in the power that is at the root of the call to change, the power of the spirit ever strong to transmute life and mind and make all young again, and once this magical force

1. *F.P.*, p. 401.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 401-2.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 402.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 402.

can be accepted in its completeness and provided there is no long-continued floundering among perverted inspirations or half motives—(of which, alas !, there is a quite good deal in recent years)¹ - the old literatures may enter rejuvenated into a new creative cycle.”² There is hope, then, still even for the Italian and the German and Spanish languages, as in the East there is for the Sanskrit language and literature, too.

But it is the English language and its poetry which receive special consideration by Sri Aurobindo in this regard. In a letter to one of his disciples who felt “the spiritual inadequacy of the English language”, he stated with confidence, “. . . the inadequacy does not exist and, even if it did, the language will have to be made adequate. It has been plastic enough in the past to succeed in expressing all that it was asked to express, however new; it must now be urged to a further new progress. In fact, the power is there and has only to be brought out more fully to serve the full occult, mystic, spiritual purpose.”³ And as to English literature, if it suffers from certain disadvantages for the task in hand, it has also, says he, “certain signal advantages”.⁴ “It is a literature that has long done great things but has neither exhausted its great natural vigour nor fixed itself in any dominant tradition, but rather has constantly shown a free spirit of poetical adventure and a perfect readiness to depart from old moorings and set its sail to undiscovered countries. It has an unsurpassed power of imaginative and intuitive language and has shown it to a very high degree in the intuitive expression of the life soul and to some degree in that of the inspired intelligence. It seems, therefore, a predestined instrument for the new poetic language of the intuitive spirit. The chief danger of failure arises from the external direction of the Anglo-Saxon mind. That has been a source of strength in combination with the finer Celtic imagination and has given English poetry a strong hold on life, but the hold has been also something of a chain continually drawing it back from the height and fullness of some great spiritual attempt to inferior levels. Today, however, the language is no longer the tongue of the English people;

1. My interpolation.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 403.

3. *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, 3rd Series, pp. 105-6.

4. *F.P.*, p. 403.

the Irish mind with its Celtic originality and psychic delicacy of vision and purpose has entered into this poetic field. It is receiving, too, for a time, an element or at least an embassy and message from the higher spiritual mind and imagination of India. The countries beyond the seas, still absorbed in their material making, have yet to achieve spiritual independence, but once that comes, the poetry of Whitman shows what large and new elements they can bring to the increase of the spiritual potentialities of the new wide-spreading language. On the whole, therefore, it is here among European tongues that there is the largest present chance of the revolution of the human spirit finding most easily its poetic utterance. It is also here by the union of a great vital energy and a considerable possibility of the spiritual vision that there may be most naturally a strong utterance of that which most has to be expressed, the seen and realised unity of life and the spirit."¹

Indeed, the case for the English language is made with convincing reasons and a sense of persuasive realism. Nor are actual examples lacking in English poetry to support Sri Aurobindo's reasonable faith in the potency and potentiality of it to come closer to that deep intuitive spiritual utterance which ultimately breaks and crystallises itself into the *mantra*. Apart from some illuminating passages of large intuitive perception in the poetry of the great Romantics like Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley etc. and the Victorians like Meredith and Patmore we have, in recent years, the examples of Stephen Phillips, A.E., Edward Carpenter, Francis Thompson, Whitman, Hopkins, Yeats whose poetic utterances have, by and large, that "inner way of vision to outer no less than to inner things" which inevitably brings about a "closer identity in the self of man with the self of things and life and Nature and of all that meets him in the universe". In other words, these have, in expressive seed-forms, some of the basic properties of *mantric* poetry. Indeed, nobody need have any doubt now that the English poetic mind has, in modern times, and under pressures from within no less than from without, begun to look increasingly inward and touch, at its most intense moments of experience, the periphery of what we, in India, know as the soul. Most of modernist poets, though outwardly intellectual and psycho-analytical in their

1. *F.P.*, pp. 403-404.

attitude to experience and mode of utterance, are really being driven to expression by some pressure deeper than their intellect and aesthetic imagination. It is the very inner spirit which is now clamouring for expression through all their intellectual and verbal subtleties and ingenuities. Clumsy and halting, hampered and veiled, no doubt still, their poetry is, in fact, a new speech, though outwardly it may take on all sorts of strange, fantastic forms, be clothed even in bizarre, 'unpoetical' images and words, and sometimes breaks loose in the most surprising and shocking rhythmic patterns. It is a new speech because the pressure, the force of the impulse, is new, being essentially inward, having the impact of the deeper spirit of man, now eager to come out with its hidden secrets and truths through our philosophical and scientific, ethical and social, artistic and imaginative modes of expression. At times we feel impatient with the bewildering experimentations and mystifying obscurities of expression which apparently seem to have invaded modern English poetry like some infectious disease. And though there have been some lucid moments, as in the 'thirties and fifties' probably, when we are happy to meet with some assured clarities and disciplined intelligibilities of expression, at times even in the traditional manner, as opposed to the consciously contrived obscurity and maddening over-ingenuity of the symbolic, allusive style of the poetry of the 'twenties', the picture, as a whole, which modern English poetry after the first World War has flashed out to us is, indeed, blurred and distorted. It is a hotchpotch. It is blind and unmeaning and hardly symptomatic of the luminous angelic or spiritual side of man. It seems as if the modern poet has lost all his bearings in life itself as he has lost his inner creative soul. But if we reflect upon the contemporary scene a little more coolly, detachedly and deeply, with a touch of the spiritual seeing, we shall discover that these are all symptoms of some deep spiritual crisis which has now, once for all, gripped the modern age. It is a definite sign of the creative urge of the soul of man, as we understand it in this country and not as it is usually understood by the man of the West, who generally equates it with the mental being touched with some vital or psychological intuitive power. The ground is, thus, being paradoxically but definitively prepared for the final emergence of that poetic speech which is "an utterance of the deepest soul of man and of the universal spirit in things." No

Approximate thoughts and feelings, words that
 have taken the place of thoughts and feelings,
 There spring the perfect order of speech, and the
 beauty of incantation.

(T. S. Eliot: *Choruses from "The Rock"* in *Collected Poems*,
Faber and Faber, pp. 177-78)

At the still point of the turning world.

Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity.
Where past and future are gathered.

Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

(T. S. Eliot : *Four Quartets*, Faber and Faber, p. 9)

Descend lower, descend only
 Into the world of perpetual solitude,
 World not world, but that which is not world,
 Internal darkness, deprivation
 And destitution of all property,
 Desiccation of the world of sense,
 Evacuation of the world of fancy,
 Inoperancy of the world of spirit;
 This is the one way, and the other
 Is the same, not in movement
 But abstention from movement; while the world moves
 In appetency, on its metallad ways
 Of time past and time future. (Ibid., p. II)

Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always—
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded

Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

(Ibid., pp. 43-44)

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What of the spirit and its search for truth ?
Have you found in old age some end
To the quest you began in your youth ?
Yes : an end to the restless endeavour
To define what is within or without,
The scope of belief—of unbelief too—
For in the end I have put all in doubt
God, man; earth, heaven; I live on in alert suspense.

I believe in my unbelief—would not force
One fibre of my being to bend in the wind
Of determinate doctrine. In doubt there is stillness
The stillness that elsewhere we may find
In the sky above us where the fixed stars
Metre out infinity and space folds
'To contain the secret substance of life
Which time in its tragic furnace moulds
To the forms of grief and glory, of vice and holiness.

But gently, lest the rhetoric steal
This mood of quietness. I will not preach
A private brand of pride or shame.
I too have heard the sounding rivers, the screech
Of amorous winds. But now the night is calm.
I listen to a music fraught with silence
To a solitude full of sound.
I have found the peace beyond violence
And gaze steadily into the gold disc that blurs

all hard distinctions.

(Herbert Read : *The Gold Disc*)

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I am that witness through whom the whole
Knows it exists. Within the coils of blood,
Whispering under sleep, there moves the flood
Of stars, battles, dark and frozen pole.
All that I am not. The cold stone
Unfolds its angel for me. On my dreams ride
The racial legends. The stars outside
Glitter under my ribs. Being all, I am alone.
I who say I call that eye I
Which is the mirror in which things see
Nothing except themselves. I die

The things, the vision, still will be.
 Upon this eye reflections of stars lie
 And that which passes, passes away, is I.

(Stephen Spender : *Poems of Dedication*, p. 44)

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Somewhere beyond the railheads
 Of reason, south or north,
 Lies a magnetic mountain
 Riveting sky to earth

Iron in the soul
 Spirit steeled in fire,
 Needle trembling on truth—
 These shall draw me there.

Near that miraculous mountain
 Compass and clock must fail,
 For space stands on its head there
 And time chases its tail.

There is iron for the asking
 Will keep all winds at bay
 Girders to take the leaden
 Strain of a sagging sky.

Oh there's mine of metal,
 Enough to make me rich
 And build right over chaos
 A cantilever bridge.

(C. Day Lewis : *Collected Poems*, pp. 108-9)

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There, as a candle's beam
 Stands firm and will not waver
 Spire-straight in a close chamber,
 As though in shadowy cave a
 Stalagmite of flame,
 The integral spirit climbs
 The dark in light for ever.

(Ibid., p. 124)

The tree grips soil, the bird
 Knows how to use the wind;
 But the full man must live
 Rooted yet unconfined

(Ibid., p. 125)

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I know a fairer land,

Whose furrows are of fire,
 Whose hills are a pure metal
 Shining for all to share.
 And there all rivers run
 To magnify the sea,
 Whose waves recur for ever
 In calm equality.

(Ibid., p. 130)

* * *

Love's the big boss at whose side for ever slouches
 The shadow of the gunman : He's mortar and dynamite;
 Antelope, drinking pool, but the tiger too that crouches.
 'Therefore be wise in the dark hour to admit
 'The logic of the gunman's trigger.
 Embrace the explosive element, learn the need
 Of tiger for antelope and antelope for tiger.

(C. Day Lewis : Quoted in *The Poetic Image*, p. 37)

There is in this handful of samples sufficient variety of themes and expressions in keeping with the various ways in which the inner spirit of the serious-minded and sensitive modern poet is struggling to reach for that something which lies "beyond itself, something that is a dim, foreshadowing of the divine urge which is prompting all creation to unfold itself and to rise out of its limitations towards the Godlike possibilities". The modern English poet has now dared to "descend lower . . . into the world of perpetual solitude" and look into its own "internal darkness", experiencing "deprivation and destitution of all property". He finds himself poised "at the still point of the turning world", moving "neither from nor towards", and is yet able to perceive at this "still point", "there is only the dance". The paradoxical truths of stillness and movement, silence and speech, time and timelessness, love and strife, separative individuality and unified identity, faith and doubt, etc., existing side by side, which the searching inward being of man experiences in course of his spiritual quest and journey are now being increasingly felt by the modern English poets and though these continue to puzzle them still, yet the fact that like Herbert Read they are now being impelled

" . . . to the restless endeavour

to define what is within or without

The scope of belief of unbelief too—"

trying to find out some ultimate truth behind "God, man; earth, heaven" by "living on in alert suspense" points to the hope that the time will come when, like

C. Day Lewis, they will all, each in his own way,
be able to discover that

"Somewhere beyond the railheads
Of reason, south or north,
Lies a magnetic mountain
Riveting sky to earth"

and that

"Near that miraculous mountain
Compass and clock must fail,
For space stands on its head there
And time chases its tail"

and finally that

"... There is a mine of metal
Enough to make me rich
And build right over chaos
A cantilever bridge."

But whether or no this assured vision of C. Day Lewis or that of "the holy city of Byzantium", as felt by W. B. Yeats, is shared by others, there is no doubt that "a period of transcendence is in gestation". As Nolini Kanta Gupta, one of the enlightened and profound poets and literary critics of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, observes:

"All efforts of modern poets and craftsmen, even those that seem apparently queer, bizarre and futile, are at bottom a travail for this transcendence, including those that seem contradictory to it.... The revolutionary shift that we notice in modern poets towards a completely new domain of subject-matter is a sign-post that more is meant than what is expressed. The superficialities and futilities that are dealt with do not in their outward form give the real trend of things. In and through all these major and constant preoccupations of our poets is "the pain of the present and the passion of the future": they are.... more prophets than poets, but prophets for the moment crying in the wilderness—although some have chosen the path of denial and revolt. They are all looking ahead or beyond or deep down, always yearning for another truth and reality which will explain, justify and transmute the present calvary of human living."¹

Referring to the marked change in the poetic expression of today he remarks:

"Naturally such an acute tension of consciousness has necessitated an overhauling of the vehicle of expression too, and the

1. Nolini Kanta Gupta: *Poets and Mystics*, Sri Aurobindo Library, Madras, 1951, pp. 55-56.

poets have been obliged to seek for new modes of expressing the inexpressible. The fact is that almost everything that can be normally expressed has been already expressed in a variety of ways and now the poetic, like the scientific or the philosophic, eye probes into the unexpressed world... for the artist too the Upanishadic problem has cropped up :

'By whom impelled does the mind fall to its target, what is the agent that is behind the eye and sees through the eyes, what is the hearing and what the speech that their respective sense organs do not and cannot convey and record adequately or at all ?'

Like the modern scientist the artist or craftsman, too, of today has become a philosopher, even a mystic philosopher. The subtler and higher ranges of consciousness are now the object of enquiry and investigations and expression and revelation for the scientist as well as for the artist. The external sense-objects, the phenomenal movements are symbols and signposts, graphs and pointer-readings of facts and realities that lie hidden, behind or beyond. The artist and the scientist are occult alchemists."¹

And it is exactly in such a psychological climate that the poetic expression is apt to come close to incantation or what we have chosen to call the *mantra*. A passage like the following, for example, is nothing short of "sheer incantation"² :

Beyond the shapes of empire, the capes of Carbonek
Over the topless waves of trenched Broceliande,
Drenched by the everlasting spray of existence,
with no mind's soil reefed or set, no slaves at the motived oars
drove into and clove the wind from unseen shores.
Swept from all altars, swallowed in a path of power
by the wrath that wrecks the pirates in the Narrow Seas...
multiple without dimension, indivisible without uniformity,
the ship of Solomon (blessed be he) drove on.

—Charles Williams : "The Last Voyage", *A Little Book of Modern Verse*, Faber and Faber

Charles Williams is but a profane and mundane and not an ostensibly religious or spiritual poet, and yet his mode of writing is so very far from that of the "natural" poets like Homer or Shakespeare, Milton or Virgil and so well steeped in the magical spell of "word-weaving, rhythm-plaiting, thought-wrining"³ that we are more

1. Ibid., p. 56.

2. Ibid., p. 57.

3. Ibid., p. 57.

easily led to some sense of the mystery of existence that passeth understanding. "The level of the poetic inspiration, at least of the poetic view and aspiration", to quote Nolini Kanta Gupta again, "has evidently shifted to a higher, a deeper degree."¹

Here, again, is Baudelaire the first of the real moderns in many ways—, who in another way and through other images and symbols makes an assault on the unseen, occult worlds thus:

Par l'opération d'un mystere vengeur
 Dans la brute assoupie un ange se réveille² (*L'aube spirituelle*)
 Le Ciel ! Couverele noir de la grande marmite
 Ou bout l'imperceptible et vaste Humanite.³ (*Le Couvercle*)

All this shows, as Nolini Kanta Gupta says, that the tension in the human consciousness has now been "raised to the nth power" and "the heat of a brooding consciousness is about to lead it to an outburst of new creation . . . human self-consciousness; the turning of oneself upon oneself, the probing and projecting of oneself into oneself self-consciousness raised so often to the degree of self-torture, masks the acute travail of the spirit. The thousand "isms" and "logies" that pullulate in all fields of life, from the political to the artistic or even the religious and the spiritual, indicate how the human laboratory is working at white heat. They are breaches in the circuit of the consciousness, volcanic eruptions from below or cosmic ray irruptions from above, tearing open the normal limit and boundary—Baudelaire's "couverele" or the "golden lid" of the Upanishads disclosing and bringing into the light of common day realities beyond and unseen till now."⁴

Now if, as stated above, one of the important functions of the *mantric* poetry is to establish a direct and intimate, flaming and firm connection, nay union between the human soul and the Divine Reality in Its multiple aspects, this desire on the part of the modern English poet to build "a cantilever bridge" "right over chaos" bears a special significance. True, C. Day Lewis is not thinking

1. Ibid., p. 57.

2. 'An avenging Mystery operating, out of the drowsy animal awakes an angel'—English translation by Nolini Kanta Gupta, op. cit., p. 59.

3. 'Heaven ! it is the dark lid upon the huge cauldron in which the imperceptible and vast humanity is boiling'—English translation by Nolini Kanta Gupta : op. cit., p. 59.

4. Ibid., p. 60.

here of any such spiritual union with his conscious mind. Nor may it be true to say that when Herbert Read speaks of finding "the peace beyond violence" and "gazing steadily into the gold disc that blurs all hard distinctions", he has, in fact, discovered that undifferentiated spiritual golden sun of truth or some cosmic aura of immutable peace "subsisting at the heart of endless agitation" (Wordsworth), of which the saints and seers speak. Also, it cannot be denied that there is still too much of the play of the creative intelligence and vital feeling and imagination, instead of the subtle and stable intuitive luminous mind behind these poetic utterances. But the fundamental fact that behind all this vital-intellectual searching and expression it is clearly the deeper eager spirit of man which has been stirred and is now struggling to speak out with its own unmistakable voice cannot be missed. As a result of it, it is not surprising if some of the modernist English poets like Hopkins and T. S. Eliot have even developed the capacity for the poetry of incantation. In some of his verses, particularly those of *Ash Wednesday* and *The Four Quartets* Eliot is consciously and steadfastly aiming at incantatory forms and rhythms. True, the incantation here is mostly cerebral and not even something emotionally and imaginatively, not to speak of, intuitively spontaneous, for when all is said and done, Eliot cannot be looked upon as more than a pseudo-mystic who has written even his *Four Quartets* in a self-conscious, intellectual, ingenious fashion. The musical effects are all studied here and the product, at best, is of a somewhat inspired "cultured mind". These certainly do not come "from the elemental soul-power within"¹ and the technique of verbal repetition employed here stands in danger of becoming an artifice in the hands of a merely clever, competent versifier. But in this intellectual age, particularly in the case of a poet like Eliot who has been much influenced and moulded by the tough ingenuities of the Metaphysical poets and the intellectual wit and taste of the 18th century poets, it is really creditable that the beauty and power of incantation or, at least, incantatory music should be attempted to be restored to poetry. Hopkins, however, is not at all an intellectual, critical, cerebral poet like Eliot. On the contrary, his feeling, his entire sensibility, in fact, is truly psychic. All his poetry, like George Herbert's, is,

1. *Life, Literature, Yoga*, p. 93.

more or less, God-inspired and turned Godward. It is an attempt to express the glory of God spread everywhere, and his own sincere spiritual aspiration to unite with it and find the true felicity in his own soul. His joys and agonies well out of the psychic depths of his heart. At the same time, he is a genuine creative artist who discards the conventional modes and metres of poetic expression because these fall short of his inward experiences, the leaping, burning longings and exquisite agonies of his deeply religious soul. His fine psychic being, therefore, requires a new utterance, a new diction, a new imagery and a new rhythm; and the result is, it chooses its own new forms of musical expression, which were much too bold and revolutionary, even shocking for the Victorian taste and stood in the way of his poetry being published until the beginnings of what is known as the 'modernist' movement in the 20th century. Now, if we coolly examine his style and rhythm and imagery, we shall find that they come very close to the poetry of true incantation. They have the vigorous force of a spontaneous intuitive creative movement, gushing forth naturally like some powerful subterranean fountain. They are closest possible approximation to the what we have termed, the *mantra*, by an English poet. His *Pied Beauty*, *The Windhover*, *The world is charged with the grandeur of God* are some of the highest and intensest forms of incantation that we may expect to find in English poetry, particularly in recent times. Here it is difficult to separate the form from the matter, the rhythm from the imagery, the thought from the style. It appears as if the vision of God's grandeur, Christ's burning glory and the unchanging Divine Beauty which he sees behind all the 'pied' beauties of the earth has been actually seen and heard and felt and realised by him in the very depths of his being and every fibre of his limbs. His poetic speech is, therefore, not the product of any cerebral activity or just vital, aesthetic imagination. It is the very language of his psychic experience. He speaks out with his soul and it is the soul in us which truly responds to him. Quite naturally his style, imagery, structure and rhythm are all very different from those of other English poets, particularly the Victorians and the moderns, and come close enough to the *mantric* speech.

But, in fact, it is not till we come to the poetry of Sri Aurobindo himself that we get the true type of *mantric* poetry in the English language and the modern manner.

It is perfectly attuned to the spirit of the *mantras* of the Vedic and Upanishadic seers. *Rose of God*, for example, or *Thought the Paraclete*, is a concentrated utterance of the highest spiritual experience and intensity ever in English poetry. Here they are :

ROSE OF GOD

Rose of God, vermillion stain on the sapphires of heaven,
Rose of Bliss, fire-sweet, seven-tinged with the ecstasies seven,
Leap up in the heart of our humanhood, O miracle, O flame,
Passion-flower of the Nameless, bud of the mystical Name.

Rose of God, great wisdom-bloom on the summits of being,
Rose of Light, immaculate core of the ultimate seeing,
Live in the mind of our earthhood, O golden mystery flower,
Sun on the head of the Timeless, guest of the marvellous hour.

Rose of God, damask force of infinity, red icon of might,
Rose of Power, with thy diamond halo piercing the night,
Ablaze in the will of the mortal, design the wonder of Thy plan,
Image of Immortality, outbreak of the Godhead in man.

Rose of God, smitten purple with the incarnate Divine Desire,
Rose of Life, crowded with petals, colour's lyre,
Transform the body of the mortal like a sweet and
magical rhyme,
Bridge our earthhood and heavenhood, make deathless the
children of Time.

Rose of God, like a blush of rapture on Eternity's face,
Rose of Love, ruby depth of all being, fire-passion of Grace,
Arise from the heart of the yearning that sobs in Nature's Abyss
Make earth the home of the Wonderful and life Beatitude's Kiss.

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THOUGHT THE PARACLETE

As some bright archangel in vision flies
Plunged in dream-caught spirit immensities,
Past the long green crests of the seas of life,
Past the orange skies of the mystic mind
Flew my thought self-lost in the vasts of God.
Sleepless wide great glimmering wings of wind
Bore the gold-red seeking of feet that trod
Space and Time's mute vanishing ends. The face

Lustred, pale-blue-lined of the hippogriff
 Eremitic, sole, daring the bourneless ways,
 Over world-bare summits of timeless being
 Gleamed; the deep twilights of world-abyss
 Failed below. Sun-realms of supernal seeing,
 Crimson-white mooned oceans of pauseless bliss
 Drew its vague heart-yearning with voices sweet.
 Hungering, large-souled to surprise the unconned
 Secrets white-fire-veiled of the last Beyond,
 Crossing power-swept silences rapture-stunned,
 Climbing high far ethers eternal-sunned,
 Thought the great-winged wanderer Paraclete
 Disappeared slow-singing a flame-word rune,
 Self was left, lone, limitless, nude, immune.

What Dr. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar says of the latter poem is really true of both: "*Thought the Paraclete* is a sudden, swift jet of piercing, unconventional melody. One reads and re-reads it, astonished and awed into a rapture; one is puzzled by its currents of thought and play of imagery; one is dazzled and thrilled by its radiation of light and riot of colour; one is chastened at last into an ineffable quietude by its sheer art, its suggestion of both lightning and motion and an unearthly peace. There is no doubt at all that the poem embodies a vast and potent revelation."¹

"...a vast and potent revelation ¹" this, in substance, is the mark of a true *mantra* and this we find in plenty in Sri Aurobindo's poetry which is all written in English. If we read his *Savitri* we shall come across a number of passages which possess all the qualities, in substance as well as expression, of *mantric* poetry. Also, there are occasions when some of his poet-disciples, too, like K. D. Sethna, Arjava (J. Chadwick), Romen, to name just a few of them, succeed at times in catching the true mantric power and grandeur in their poetry written in English.

As such, we need have no doubt in our mind as to whether the English language is capable of creating not only incantation but true *mantra*, reminiscent of the ancient Vedic and Upanishadic seers, through its poetry. Nevertheless, we cannot at present get away from the fact that it is not the British but Indian poetic genius which is making an attempt of this kind, being naturally

1. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar: *Sri Aurobindo*, 1950, p. 375.

caught up by the deeper creative Time-spirit. That is why the serious-minded poet of the West has to understand and appreciate the following hopeful observations made by Sri Aurobindo as early as the 1920's, if he feels within himself the urge for some deeper and more potent self-expression, ushering in an entirely new age in the creative literary field :

"The pouring of a new and greater self-vision of man and Nature and existence into the idea and the life is the condition of the completeness of the coming poetry. It is a large setting and movement of life opening a considerable expansion to the human soul and mind that has been in the great ages of literature the supreme creative stimulus. The discovery of a fresh intellectual or aesthetic motive of the kind that was common in the last century initiates only an ephemeral ripple on the surface and seldom creates work of the very first order. The real inspiration enters with a more complete movement, an enlarged horizon of life, a widening of the fields of the idea, a heightening of the flight of the spirit. The change that is at present coming over the mind of the race began with a wider cosmic vision, a sense of the greatness and destiny and possibilities of the individual and the race, the idea of humanity and of the unity of man with man and a closer relation too and unity of his mind with the life of Nature. It is the endeavour to make the expression of these things one with the expression of life that imparts to the poetry of Whitman so much more large and vital an air than the comparatively feeble refinement and careful art of most of the contemporary poetry of Europe—not that the art has to be omitted, but that it must be united with a more puissant sincerity of spirit and greatness of impulse and a sense of new birth and youth and the potencies of the future. The intellectual idea was yet not enough, for it had to find its own greater truth in the spiritual idea and its finer cultural field in a more delicate and complex and subtle psychic sight and experience. It is this that has been prepared by recent and contemporary poets. The expression of this profounder idea and experience is again not enough until the spiritual idea has passed into a complete spiritual realisation and not only affected individual intellect and psychic mind and imagination, but entered into the general sense and feeling of the race and taken hold upon all thought and life to reinterpret and remould them in their image. It is this spiritual realisation that the future poetry has to help forward by giving to it its eye of sight,

its shape of aesthetic beauty, its revealing tongue and it is this greatening of life that it has to make its substance. "It is in effect a larger cosmic vision, a realising of the Godhead in the world and in man, of his divine possibilities as well as the greatness of the power that manifests in what he is, a spiritualised uplifting of his thought and feeling and sense and action, a more developed psychic mind and heart, a truer and a deeper insight into his nature and the meaning of the world, a calling of diviner potentialities and more spiritual values into the intention and structure of his life that is the call upon humanity, the prospect offered to it by the slowly unfolding and now more clearly disclosed self of the universe. 'The nations that most include and make real these things in their life and culture are the nations of the coming dawn and the poets of whatever tongue and race who most completely see with this vision and speak with the inspiration of its utterance are those who shall be the creators of the poetry of the future.'"¹

It is doubtful whether any critic of poetry had unfolded to us before such a sublimely magnificent prospect and future of this rich human speech. "The future of poetry is immense" thus declared Matthew Arnold in 1880, but the utmost he could see was that "more and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us." And his idea of the poetic interpretation of life and poetic consolation and sustenance was at best that of a refined, cultured romanticist. Again, the moral and intellectual visionary that he was, he pitted poetry against religion and philosophy which he dubbed as "but the shadows and dreams and false shows of knowledge", and could at best declare, echoing Wordsworth, "The day will come when we shall wonder at ourselves for having trusted to them, for having taken them seriously; and the more we perceive their hollowness, the more we shall prize 'the breath and finer spirit of knowledge' offered to us by poetry." But it is quite obviously doubtful whether we can ever have a civilisation or a culture which is quite devoid of the importance of religion and philosophy and science and entirely dependent upon the resources of poetry alone, particularly as understood by Arnold. Nor is the Shelleyan final verdict that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" adequate enough and capable enough to

1. *F.P.*, pp. 404-406.

take us very far, unless, of course, we take the poets in the Vedic sense of "seers". But the prospect of poetry which Sri Aurobindo unfolds before us in *The Future Poetry*, stage by stage and plane upon plane, is one which is based upon not only what we may call the historical facts and events but a revelatory, a great formative and illuminative vision of the evolving creative Time-spirit. And it is almost like a challenge to the humanity and its poet-representatives of today and tomorrow. And as to the soul of the challenge it lies in catching and getting closer and ever closer to what he calls "the *mantra* of the Real". This is the basic truth which the modern poet has to understand and follow in order to reach the highest possible summit of his powers.

■ ■ ■

Chapter 6

“THE FIVE SUNS OF POETRY”

If the most characteristic as well as the noblest and best creation of the Vedic and Upanishadic poet was the *mantra*, Sri Aurobindo's eloquent plea for the creation of the *mantra* in modern times, or at any rate, in times to come, chiefly because it is but the natural expression of the intuitive and spiritual age fast dawning upon us, points to the interesting discovery that the earliest poetic creation of man is also going to be his future and highest concern. This does not, however, mean any blind, slavish or mechanical revivalism of the past or following the footsteps of the ancient poets without any originality of one's own or touch of novelty from the coming age. Though the central pursuit and ultimate goal remain essentially the same, the path will now be - and naturally so - traversed in several diverse and even opposite ways and wide-ranging movements embracing the whole gamut of our life. For the new spiritual age which is opening before us is doing so after having explored, both extensively and intensively, the vastly expanding realms of mind and matter. Indeed, such an exploration is still continuing on an ever-increasing scale, and though on the face of it our “age of materialism, . . . of positive outward matter of fact and of scientific and utilitarian reason”¹ seems to be a far cry from the days “when man believed himself to be near to the gods and felt their presence in his bosom and could think he heard some accents of their divine and eternal wisdom take form on the heights of his mind,”² yet Sri Aurobindo says again and again, “curiously enough -- or naturally, since in the economy of Nature opposite creates itself out of opposite and not only like from like -- it is to some far-off light at least of the view of ourselves at our greatest of which such ideas were a concretised expression that we seem to be returning.”³ Today, no doubt, we are the inheritors of many intermediate ages and the age of reason which has been upon us for the last several

1. *F.P.*, p. 282.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 281.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 282.

centuries has moulded our outlook and life in many new ways. Our intellectual knowledge has enormously developed and become more complex. The very basis of our culture and civilization has got vastly enlarged. Our science and technology, art and architecture, educational and social institutions, even our philosophy and religion, and our very habits and customs, manners and morals have undergone an appreciable change under the impact of the age of intellect and reason. Yet the discerning amongst us cannot fail to perceive, as Sri Aurobindo does, that it is to something very like the effort which was in the heart of the Vedic or at least the Vedantic mind that we appear to be arriving once again. This is true of not only the Eastern but also the Western mentality. Our very intensive scientific and intellectual knowledge has now revealed to us a face and form of the material reality that we cannot help trying to seek again for "the spiritual reality of that which we and all things are".¹

On account of the remarkable advances made in recent years in physics, biology, psychology, and parapsychology, it appears it will not be long before the modern scientific mind veers round to the ancient Vedantic truth of the Spirit inhabiting all existences and forms of life,—*sarvam khalvidam Brahma*. In the new scientific language, this truth is well described by F.L. Kunz as follows:

"The New Physics demonstrates the reality of super-sensory and non-material domains styled Force-fields. Force-fields are aspects of that background of nature called the Continuum; they are today constantly employed in orbiting artificial satellites, exchanging signals with them and dissolving matter into energy and residues."²

And the general conclusion arrived at is that we have thus "two different and interconnected aspects of nature...there is the phenomenal sense world and the noumenal real world, precisely as the best of the Greeks and the Hindus realised."³

And, therefore, as Sri Aurobindo says: "Our minds are once more trying to envisage the self, the spirit of Man and the spirit of the universe."⁴ It is true that

1. Ibid., p. 282.

2. Reproduced from the journal *Main Currents in Contemporary Thought*, March-April, 1961—Quoted in the *Bulletin*, op. cit., August, 1962, p. 90.

3. Ibid., quoted in *The Bulletin*, op. cit., p. 92.

4. *F.P.*, p. 282.

we are still trying to do so rather intellectually but the time is certainly not far-off when we shall feel the inescapable urge to make the right spiritual approach to this big, subtle task. And as Sri Aurobindo tells us again, "with this effort there must rise too on the human mind the conception of the godheads in whom this Spirit, this marvellous Self and Reality which broods over the world, takes shape in the liberated soul and life of the human being, his godheads of Truth and Freedom and Unity...of Love and universal Delight, his godheads of universal and eternal Beauty...a supreme Light and Harmony and Good."¹

But no less significant is it to reflect that this new vision will be different from that of the old times. It will not be something remote, exclusively inward and mystical, beyond the reach of common humanity, as the older vision was. On the contrary, this new vision will seek to establish a close and familiar intimacy of the godheads with our earth and "embody them not only in the heart of religion and philosophy, nor only in the higher flights of thought and art, but also, as far as may be, in the common life and action of man".² The old mysteries will no longer be mysteries to us, fit to be understood by the chosen few only. It is very probable, therefore, this new phase of our onward progressive march "may well lead to an age in which man as a race will try to live in a greater Truth than has yet governed our kind".³ If our life and outlook, thus, get, in due course, radically changed, it is no wonder if our poetic activity, too, will reveal a correspondingly revolutionary change. This does not mean, of course, that all poetry will become wholly and solely spiritual, just as it will not mean that all of us, whether we are ready or willing for it or not, will turn into saints and seers. On the contrary, there will still be plenty of poetry written, as in the past, with the older consciousness. But what is no less interesting is that this may bring about the emergence of the poet-seer in the truer sense of the term than is understood today, of the poet who is also a Rishi, a master singer of Truth, and a magician of "a diviner and more universal beauty."⁴ As a matter of fact, as

1. Ibid., pp. 282-3.

2. Ibid., p. 283.

3. Ibid., pp. 283-84.

4. Ibid., p. 284.

Sri Aurobindo says, "a glint of this change is already visible."¹ In poetry, there is, for example, "the conscious effort of Whitman, the tone of Carpenter, the significance of the poetry of A.E., the rapid immediate fame of Tagore"² to convince us of the new signs which are already visible. And, as we saw in the last chapter, through the examples of some of the selected specimens from the modernist poetry of Yeats, Eliot, Herbert Read, C. Day Lewis and Spender, "the commencement of such a greater leading"³ goes on growing as years pass, and does not remain confined to the earliest possible and, more or less, traditional poets only of this century. And as far as the poetry of Sri Aurobindo is concerned, some of whose most daring and luminous and uncommonly beautiful utterances we have seen in *Rose of God* and *Thought the Paraclete*, for example, we have no doubt whatsoever in our mind that "the idea of the poet who is also the Rishi has made again its appearance."⁴

Now the question which arises here is what would be the ideal form and spirit of such "an intuitive revealing poetry" which, on the one hand, would be in a direct and intimate and living linkage with the sublimely uplifting and potent ancient Vedic and Upanishadic traditions, and, on the other, be daringly and integrally new and complex and richly varied in a degree unapprehended before, and wide enough to cover all the diversities and complexities of modern life and aspirations. If we go through the pages of *The Future Poetry*—Chapters XXV to XXXI—, we shall find that Sri Aurobindo deals with this question in sufficiently searching, illuminating and convincing details, and demonstrates beyond any shadow of a doubt how the whole picture of such a poetry is clearly and cogently present in his luminous mind not only in its essence but in the very physical form and structure, and, what is more, how his easily majestic, and persuasive, communicative power can cause in us the necessary suspension of disbelief and enable us to see the splendours of the future poetry with thrilling vibrations of hope and delight all over.

1. Ibid., p. 285.

2. Ibid., p. 285.

3. Ibid., p. 285.

4. Ibid., p. 285.

The poetry of the coming spiritual age, which should be the highest possible concern of the modern poetic spirit—which, indeed, is the ideal spirit and form of all great and high poetry, would be the outcome, says Sri Aurobindo, of "a supreme harmony of five eternal powers, Truth, Beauty, Delight, Life and the Spirit".¹ The doubting spirits amongst us may say here that there is hardly anything new in this statement. We have all known for ages that poetry is a thing of beauty and joy and has also aimed at life and truth in its own way. The only novelty Sri Aurobindo seems to have introduced here is to capitalise all these terms. Let me, then, emphasise it here that as a literary critic, or for the matter of that, as a critic or exponent of whatever subject he has in hand, he does not aim at, at least on the surface, any striking originality just for the sake of novelty and shock-giving tactics, as some of our modern critics seem to have betrayed themselves into doing. On the contrary, on the face of it, he may even appear to be underlining some of the age-old, well-known truths and principles. But the originality comes in when we begin to see how these age-old, well-known truths are examined by him afresh and with greater profundity and subtlety than before, in the light of his own larger and deeper and more luminous consciousness and experience which came to him in an ever increasing degree, through the operation upon him of the powers of the Overmind, and the new spiritual light and truth, which he called the Supermind. He always recognises and respects all that is good and sound and of an abiding interest and value in the inherited poetic and critical traditions, and gives it the place due to it in the new spiritual economy he has always in view, and, thus, appears to us, in a supremely satisfying manner, as the very embodiment of Eliot's ideal of 'tradition and the individual talent'.

In keeping with the ancient critical tradition, he looks upon all high or great poetry to be the product of these five eternal powers, powers of Truth, Beauty, Delight, Life and the Spirit. Only he calls them "the five greater ideal lamps or rather the five suns of poetry"² and thereby gives us a beautifully picturesque and memorable phrase, and a new critical terminology,

1. Ibid., p. 286.

2. Ibid., p. 286.

on the Vedic analogy, to the Western literary world.

(i) **TRUTH**

Now what is this eternal power of Truth of which Sri Aurobindo speaks here ? Certainly not "the limited truth of yesterday" which the intellectual and scientific side of our recent progress has given us with so much of outward fanfare and brilliance. But the truth which is divine in the largest and highest sense and is, therefore, constantly progressive and multitudinous and evolutionary. Sri Aurobindo takes us again to the Vedic times and referring to "the description which the old Vedic poet once gave of the seeking of divine Truth" says that it "applies vividly to the mind of our age". This is how the Vedic poet puts it :

"As it climbs from height to height, there becomes clear to its view all the much that is yet to be done."¹

Now that the scientific age of intellect and reason is failing us and proving inadequate to the higher and deeper urges, aspirations and researches of our emerging spirit, we are now beginning to see that "it is in some great awakening of the self and spiritual being of man" alone that we may hope to find "all the much that is yet to be done", as spoken of by the ancient Vedic poet. And here is another Vedic poet-seer who gives us the needed hint when he says :

"New states come into birth, covering upon covering awaken to knowledge, till in the lap of the Mother one wholly sees."²

'The Mother', of course, refers here to the original creative Divine Consciousness and Force; and it is by lying in its lap alone that "one wholly sees". Already we have begun to see that the world is not a soulless machine and we ourselves are not mere "so much transient thinking matter", thanks, paradoxically enough, to the nineteenth century intellectual pursuit, culminating not only in the present-day enormous scientific and technological discoveries and advances but also in a new supraphysical atomic as well as cosmic vision of Matter. The facts of identity, eternity and of a conscious soul-power have come to the very doors of our knowledge and life. All this is increasingly impres-

1. *F.P.*, p. 286.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

sing upon us that we are again "moving back from the physical obsession to the consciousness that there is a soul and greater self within us and the universe which finds expression here in the life and the body".¹

But this turning back to the "soul and greater self within us" is not now going to, as it did in the days of yore, turn us away, in the spirit and manner of the world-denying ascetic, from our mother earth. On the contrary, it now insists that we would rather "drink full of her bosom of beauty and power and raise her life to a more perfect greatness".² As this deeper self-knowledge grows within us, we are seized by "the idea of a vast creative will of life and action as the secret of existence".³ Indeed, the culmination of this new spiritual knowledge will be reached when we shall realise that "a spirit which is all life because it is greater than life, is rather the truth in which we shall most powerfully live".⁴ That is to say, we have now begun to realise that "the spirit and life are not incompatible, but rather a greater power of the spirit brings a greater power of life".⁵ This is a secret which the ancient Vedic poet-seers no doubt knew but it is now that we have to realise it in our day-to-day physical, vital, mental and spiritual life, both individually and collectively.

Now if our poets and artists are able to see this subtle and powerful truth to the extent of dynamising it through their creations, they can certainly bring about that "mediation between the truth of the spirit and the truth of life" which is the greatest need of today and tomorrow. There is no reason really why they should not, for, as Sri Aurobindo says, "poetry and art are born mediators between the immaterial and the concrete, the spirit and life." In this sphere, at any rate, they have a distinct advantage over the philosophers and men of religion, for philosophy may still get lost in abstractions and religion turned towards "an intolerant otherworldliness and asceticism"⁶ but poetry remains, as ever, a vivid and warming thing of life and beauty and joy culminating in truth.

1. *F.P.*, p. 287.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

This, however, is just one aspect of the matter—the operative, dynamic aspect of the power of Truth working itself out in human life in an increasingly integral manner through poetry.

It is, however, chiefly in its theoretical aspect that Sri Aurobindo takes uncommon pains to explain to us what he means by the eternal power of Truth incarnating itself in poetry. But, first of all, he tries to dispose of some of those petrifying views on the matter by which, according to him, the conception of Truth gets, in fact, limited, rigid and narrow, even perverted. As he says, “we have all our own notions of the Truth and that gives an ambiguous character to the word and brings in often a narrow and limited sense of it into our idea of poetry”.¹ But we are forgetting that there have been people who object to the very fact that poetry has anything at all to do with truth. The poet, they say, is “a lover only of Beauty, she his only worshipped goddess, and not truth but imagination her winged servant and the radiant messenger of the Muse”.² And as to the question of truth it is sufficient if he “takes outward or actual truth only as a first hint” and thereafter “steeps most subtly whatever crude matter it gives to his mind in the delightful hues of imagination and transmutes it into the unfettered beauty of her shapes”.³ Now, this is a view which quite obviously looks upon art and truth as “two unconnected or little connected things.”⁴ The view, one may say, is as old as Plato himself. We are all familiar with one of his main objections to poetry on grounds of truth. The poet, he said, is “thrice removed . . . from the truth . . . ; he knows appearances only.”⁵ It is obvious that this primary objection to poetry was, in fact, as Daiches rightly stated, an epistemological one—it stems from his theory of knowledge. For him truth was the only ultimate reality; it consisted of the “Ideas” of things. And the poet who was concerned chiefly with imitating their appearances and shadows only had, therefore, nothing to do with it; he gave us merely fiction and not truth. Then there is a view that is no doubt prepared

1. *Ibid.*, p. 293.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 293.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 293-94.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 294.

5. Daiches: *op. cit.*, p. 15.

to admit some truth into the realm of poetry but only on the condition that it should be so "transfigured" by imagination that it is made "unrecognisable" in its characteristic process i.e. unrecognisable to our familiar understanding. This theory is usually clumsily put and does not know what it really means. For there is, indeed, a deeper truth behind this view of art and poetry, inasmuch as the transfiguring power of imagination with which the poet invariably works no doubt brings about a great change in the presentation and form of truth. So what this view of art really means to say is that it "is not an imitation or reproduction of outward Nature"¹ that it should aim at, but give us something more inwardly true and beautiful than the external life and appearance by the aid of the transmuting faculty of imagination. This view usually assumes that the external life of Nature is not beautiful and delightful enough and so the truth portrayed about it, as it is, will not be pleasing or charming. Let the poet, therefore, create a really beautiful world by transmuting the truth about the ugly reality with the aid of imagination. It is, I think, reminiscent of Sir Philip Sidney who in his famous *Apology for Poetry* put the matter thus:

"Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as diverse poets have done—neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet smelling flowers nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden."²

The implication, obviously, is that if any truth of life is admitted into poetry, it must be transfigured and thus rendered beautiful and "golden".

Then there is a view which is quite opposed to this, and looks upon the truth of poetry as "the reality of life in its most strenuous vital sense, the reality of what we see and hear and touch and vitally feel and energetically think with the most positive impact of the mind, the raw, rough, concrete and dynamic fact of experience to be transferred without any real change to rhythmic form".³ Such a theory derives its life from an extreme cult of realism and vital power. The sociological and Marxist approaches to poetry and art are very often derived from

1. *F.P.*, p. 294.

2. Holmes, Fussell and Frazer: *The Major Critics*, an anthology, New York, 1957, p. 50.

3. *F.P.*, p. 294.

this idea. Almost the extreme point of it is reached when we are told that "poetry to be faithful to life must manage not only her seeing and expression, but her rhythmic movement so as to create some subjective correspondence with life, creep and trip and walk and run and bound along with it, reproduce every bang and stumble and shuffle and thump of the vital steps, and we shall get a quite new, large and vigorous music and in comparison with its sincere and direct power the old melodies will fade into false and flimsy sweetnesses of insipid artifice. Here what is demanded is not beauty but power or rather force. If beauty can get in, if she can dress herself in these new and strong colours, we shall gratefully accept her, provided she is not too beautiful to be true and does not bring in again with her the unreal, the romantic or remotely ideal or some novel kind of perverse imagination. But if ugly, brutal and sordid things are shown powerfully in their full ugliness, brutality and sordidness without any work of transmutation, so much the better since truth of life, force of vital reality of whatever kind set and made vivid in a strong illumination is what we shall henceforth demand of the artist in verse."¹ It may be remarked here without any prejudice to their originality as well as abiding creative powers, how some of the characteristic, representative and influential modernist poems of our century, such as those of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot poems like *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and *Cantos*, *The Waste Land* and *A Cooking Egg*, to name the most important and familiar of them—and such revolutionary poetical-epical prose works as *Ulysses* and *Finnegans' Wake* of James Joyce—also bear out the truth of these observations. It seems as if Sri Aurobindo could very well anticipate these poetical and literary developments and movements of our times much before they had actually occurred. Also, the kind of critical taste and tendency which such an extreme theory of realism in art has engendered in our times is well illustrated in the following defence of James Joyce by J. Campbell and H.M. Robinson in their valuable commentary on *Finnegans' Wake*:

"In some quarters it is the fashion to dismiss Joyce with various charges, all pivoting on the word 'decadent'. He is a solipsist talking to himself in a nutshell kingdom of his own. He is a sick spirit addicted to pathologic

1. *F.P.*, pp. 294-95.

gnawings. . . . He is a man who has lost his faith and whose world is a living doomsday, a black pit of pessimism. If Joyce is sick, his disease is the neurosis of our age. Lifting our eyes from his page we find in every aspect of society the perversion, the decay, and the disintegration of religion, love and morality that he has described in *Finnegans' Wake*. The hypocrisy of political promises, the prurient pre-occupation with sex, the fascination of lurid headlines, gossip and its effect on a literate but basically ignorant bourgeoisie—all these are mirrored to the life by this liveliest of observers. . . . If Joyce's viewpoint is pathologic, then any roiser lens is sentimental."¹

One notices that the critical defence of such typical poetical products of our age as *The Waste Land* and *Cantos*, including their apparent incoherent, formless form and usually free and unconventional rhythms and imagery and language, also follows more or less the same line. It is evident, therefore, to what an extreme limit this cult of unashamed realism has been carried in both the creative and critical activities of today in the name of the raw, rough and concrete truth of life which is sought to be transferred to the rhythmic form of poetic utterance without undergoing any process of aesthetic transmutation. Here the questions of beauty and delight and eternal truth subsisting in the apparent crudities and rough and tumble of life do not arise, or bother the creators and critics alike. It cannot be denied, however, that "the crudity of actual life so treated and heightened in art—for art cannot merely reproduce, it cannot help heightening—gives us a new sensation, becomes a crude and heady wine setting up an agreeable disturbance in the midriff and bowels and a violent satisfaction in the brain and can be given by a powerful writer a wide appeal demanding no effort of taste or understanding from the average man who makes the multitude."²

Then, again, "there is the old academic conception, truth of the cultivated intelligence, truth of reason, philosophic and scientific truth. . . . And in this connection we have many familiar notions chasing each other across the field, such as, on one side, the compatibility or incompatibility of philosophy and poetry, or, on the other, the definition of poetry as substantially a criticism

1. *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans' Wake*, London, 1947, p. 295.

2. *F.P.*, p. 295.

of life though set in artistic form and a high and serious tone.”¹ Indeed, by now we are quite familiar with the views and arguments of Aristotle and the Aristotelians on the subject of poetry *vs* philosophy and history, and we may now include science too and those of Arnold and the Arnoldians, on the theme of poetry as an application of ideas to, or criticism of, life. And we must not forget that aesthetes like Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde have, on the contrary, their own particular notions about the truth of art. The moderns appear to be a little different and bolder in their approach. As C.M. Bowra tells us, “the truth which they demand is not mere truth or ordinary truth, nor a simple avoidance of falsehood, but a whole truth in the full sense of the phrase, the truth as they see it, with their whole natures, when their wits and sensibilities and emotions are all at work.”² But we would like to suggest on the basis of our own ancient culture and the observations of Sri Aurobindo that even the mere quickening of our “wits and sensibilities and emotions” will not prove adequate to enable us to see and face “the whole truth”. Not until the large and bold seeing eye of the coiled spiritual power within us is awakened and utilised to its full stature, can we really and fully accomplish this task.

However, with the luminous catholicity and justice, taste and discrimination with which Sri Aurobindo looks upon everything, giving each act or point of view its due place in the wide totality of vision and creation, it will be idle for us to expect that he will condemn any of these approaches to Truth. On the contrary, he tries to put them forward in the clearest and most characteristic light possible. Only he will not like to be bound by the limitations of any one of them. Indeed, one of the beauties of the style of his criticism and exposition lies in the fact that while he puts forward any particular point of view in its best possible light, he also felicitously succeeds in showing up its limits and limitations, at the same time.

Having, thus, taken a bird’s eye view of the situation as it has come down to us on the subject of the conception and treatment of truth in poetry and art, and also assessed it with as much of just detachment and tolerance

1. Ibid., p. 296.

2. *The Creative Experiment*, Macmillan, 1949, p. 6, also quoted in *The World of Poetry*, p. 67.

as possible, Sri Aurobindo now gives us his own large view of the matter and we shall see again how he achieves a rich and complex, bold and ample synthesis between the Eastern and the Western traditions, between the material and the spiritual, the outer and inner aspects of the poetic truth.

"The poetic Truth of which I am speaking", says he, "has nothing to do with any of these limitations. Truth, as she is seen by us in the end, is an infinite goddess, the very front and face of Infinity.... This infinite, eternal and eternally creative Truth is no enemy of imagination or even of free fancy, for they too are god-heads and can wear one of her faces or of her expressive masks, while imagination is perhaps the very colour of her creative process, her births and movements are innumerable, her walk supple and many-pathed, and through all divine powers and universal means she can find her way to her own riches, and even error is her illegitimate child and serves, though wantonly, rebelliously and through many a giddy turn, her mother's many-formed self-adaptive world-wide aim. Now it is something of this infinite Truth which poetry succeeds in giving us with a high power, in its own way of beauty, by its own opulent appointed means."¹

The range and compass of the poetic Truth is, therefore, infinitely wide but the method of expression is distinctive; it is something which is peculiarly its own. Indeed, here, too, i.e., in the mode of expression and communication we find a general eternal and infinite law operating. It is this that "infinite Truth has her many distinct ways of expressing and finding herself and each way must be kept distinct and the law of one must not be applied to the law of another form of her self-expression."² This sense of distinctness and peculiarity of each mode of expression, however, "does not mean that the material of one cannot be used as the material of another".³ But the essential and important thing to note is that this overlapping, fluid "material" must be "cast by a different power into a different mould" till all are discovered to be meeting, uniting and fusing, that is to say, each losing its own separate identity into a general and infinitely one commonalty, "on their tops" i.e.

1. *F.P.*, pp. 296-97.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 297.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 297.

at the highest conceivable summit of the infinite spirit.

No wonder, then, if Sri Aurobindo tells us: "Truth of poetry is not truth of philosophy or truth of science or truth of religion only, because it is another way of self-expression of infinite Truth so distinct that it appears to give quite another face of things and reveal quite another side of experience."¹ No doubt, "a poet may have a religious creed or may subscribe to a system of philosophy or take rank himself like Lucretius or certain Indian poets as a considerable philosophical thinker or succeed like Goethe as a scientist as well as a poetic creator".² But "the moment he begins to argue out his system intellectually in verse or puts up a dressed-up science straight into metre or else inflicts like Wordsworth or Dryden rhymed sermons or theological disputations on us, he is breaking the law. And even if he does not move so far astray, yet the farther he goes in that direction even within the bounds of his art, he is, though it has often been done with a tolerable, sometimes a considerable or total success, treading on unfirm or at any rate on lower ground. It is difficult for him there to maintain the authentic poetic spirit and pure inspiration".³ Cases of Dryden, Pope, Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning, to name some of the major defaulters among English poets, are there to confirm the truth of this observation.

The primary fact which, unfortunately, is apt to be overlooked by those poets who are carried away with the zeal to teach the philosophical or scientific or moral and religious truths, observed and even experienced by them, is that the poetic is a distinct muse altogether and once the poet chooses to stand before its altar he has got "to change his robes of mind and serve the rites of a different consecration".⁴ He has "to bring out into the front that other personality in him who looks with a more richly irised seeing eye and speaks with a more rapturous voice".⁵ It is chiefly because the poet, working as he does, with the word, is to be naturally endowed with the thrill of the ecstasy which words alone, as distinct from ideas and feelings, can so naturally

1. *Ibid.*, p. 297.

2. *Ibid.* pp. 297-98.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 298.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 298.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 298.

and richly afford. Just as "philosophy has its joy of deep and comprehensive understanding and religion its hardly expressible rapture"¹, so the distinct delight of poetry lies in the joy which the word provides, particularly because it tries to go to the very fountainhead of language. Here we are immediately reminded of the famous statement that 'poetry is made of words and not with ideas'. Of course, the antithesis and opposition put up between 'words' on the one hand, and 'ideas' on the other, in the way it has been done here, cannot be fully accepted, but in so far as the statement puts a premium or emphasis upon the basic importance of words in poetry, as distinguished from the philosophical, moral or scientific idea expressed in it, the truth of it is unquestioned. No wonder, if Keats said in one of his letters to Bailey that he "looked upon fine phrases like a lover".² We see here that not only is the legitimate importance of words in the eyes of a poet emphasised but the very emphasis is expressed in a beautifully and delightfully vivid language. Dr. I.A. Richards and Dr. F.R. Leavis, two of the most serious-minded and responsible critics of today, have also emphasised the fundamental importance of words to a poet. "The chief characteristic of poets", says Dr. Richards, "is their amazing *command* of words."³ And as to Dr. Leavis he goes even deeper into the matter when he penetratingly says in *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932): "His (a poet's) power of making words express what he feels is indistinguishable from his awareness of what he feels . . . He is a poet because his interest in his experience is not separable from his interest in words; because, that is, of his habit of seeking by the evocative use of words to sharpen his awareness of his ways of feeling, so making these communicable."⁴

Naturally, therefore, as C. Day Lewis, another of our competent and felicitous poetic critics in modern times, reminds us in *The Poet's Task* (1951): "The poet, from the start, is a man playing with words, fascinated, observed by them. As he gains mastery over them, he makes the game increasingly more difficult for himself, partly by inventing new rules, breaking away from the traditional techniques in which his juvenilia were written,

1. *F.P.*, p. 298.

2. *The World of Poetry*, op. cit., p. 200.

3. Quoted in *The World of Poetry*, op. cit., p. 201.

4. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 203.

attempting more subtle or daring combinations of words : partly because his experience has become richer and more complex, thus demanding of him greater verbal efforts to get at the truth of it.”¹ It is, thus, when the poet gets fully engaged in this delightful game of words, - not simply for the sake of the game, however, but to get at the “truth” of his increasingly richer and more complex experience - that he is in his most characteristic and best element, as distinguished from the element of the philosopher or scientist or man of religion. Yes, let us repeat, it is the ‘words’ which is the chief mark of distinction in a poet but not idle words or words for the sake of words or simply pursuing a thrilling game of words, as quite a number of our poets and prose-writers, even some of the most distinguished ones, have been, unfortunately, doing but, as Coleridge so discreetly and felicitously reminds us, “words that convey feelings, and words that flash images, and words of abstract notion, (which) flow together, and rush on like a stream”.²

Sri Aurobindo, too, like nearly all poet artists is deeply aware of the characteristic part which the joyous interest in the word plays in poetry. What is more, through this distinctive medium of the word “the poet may express precisely the same thing in essence as the philosopher or the man of religion or the man of science, may even give us truth of philosophy, truth of religion, truth of science”.³ But since he is a poet and not a philosopher or scientist or moralist, he has got to transmute it, abstract from it “something on which the others insist in their own special form and gives us something more which poetic sight and expression bring”.⁴ That is to say, “he has to convert it into truth of poetry”.⁵ But it would be certainly much better for his art if he “saw it originally with the poetic insight, the creative, intuitive, directly perceiving and interpreting eye; for then his utterance of truth is likely to be more poetic, authentic, inspired and compelling”.⁶

Quite obviously, such a “distinction between poetic and other truth, well enough felt but not always well

1. Quoted in *The World of Poetry*, op. cit., p. 201.

2. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 200.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 298.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 298.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 299.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 299.

observed,”¹ is worth dwelling upon, specially when we see that in the new expanding age poetry is bound to “include increasingly in its scope much that will be common to it with philosophy, religion and even in a broader sense with science, and yet it will at the same time develop more intensely the special beauty and peculiar power of its own insight and its own manner”.²

As a matter of fact, “there is a whole gulf of difference” here, subsisting upon “the difference of the principal, the indispensable instrument we must use and of the appeal to the mind and the whole manner”.³ The philosopher, for example, “sees in the dry light of reason, proceeds dispassionately by a severe analysis and abstraction of the intellectual content of the truth, a logical slow close stepping from idea to pure idea”.⁴ Naturally, the method employed here is “difficult and nebulous to the ordinary, hard, arid, impossible to the poetic mind”.⁵ Indeed, what distinguishes the poetic from the philosophic mind is sharp and deep enough, for “the poetic mind sees at once in a flood of coloured light, in a moved experience, in an ecstasy of the coming of the word, in splendours of form, in a spontaneous leaping out of inspired idea upon idea”.⁶

Turning to the scientist, we see that he, too, proceeds, “by the intellectual reason” but with “a microscopic scrutiny which brings it to bear on an analysis of sensible fact and process and on the correct measure and relation of force and energy as it is seen working on the phenomenal stuff of existence, and joins continually link of fact with fact and coil of process with process till he has under his hand at least a skeleton and tissue the whole connected chain of apparent things”.⁷ But to the poetic mind the whole of such a process of knowledge through minute scrupulous scrutiny will appear to be “a dead mechanical thing; for the eye of the poet loves to look on breathing acting life in its perfected synthesis and rhythm, not on the constituent measures, still less on the dissected parts”⁸

1. *Ibid.*, p. 299.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 299.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 299.

4. *F.P.*, p. 299.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 299.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 299-300.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 300.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 300.

and the ultimate result or gain of this poetic seeing is that it succeeds in seeing the very "soul of wonder of things"¹ and not merely "the mechanical miracle"² which is usually caught by the enthusiastic scientific seeker. Indeed, "the brooding philosopher or the discovering scientist cannot . . . do without the aid of a greater power of intuition"³ and this power of intuition is something which comes naturally and easily to the truly gifted poetic mind, for "the mind of the poet sees by intuition and direct perception"⁴ and, therefore, the aspect of truth to which he thrills is "the living truth of the form, of the life that inspires it, of the creative thought behind and the supporting movement of the soul and a rhythmic harmony of these things revealed to his delight in their beauty".⁵ It is chiefly due to this that when philosophy seeks to transcend its first effort of knowledge which is only for the sake of pure understanding and reach its greater height of "taking Truth alive in the spirit and clasp and grow one with her",⁶ it has to adopt not only the poetic mode of direct intuitive knowledge but also the vivid, intimately imaged and rhythmic language of poetry. Indeed, we invariably see that "the language of intuitive thinking moves always . . . to an affinity with poetic speech".⁷ This is what we generally find in the ancient literature of the Upanishads whose natural vehicle of expression is indubitably poetic.

Similarly, religion tries at first to know the truth of God, the Highest through "a scheme of religious knowledge or guiding creed and dogma, a taming yoke of moral instruction or purifying law of religious conduct and an awakening call of religious emotion, worship, cult",⁸ and as far as this aspect of the religious truth and its own peculiar method of procedure are concerned, there is a good deal of difference between religion and poetry. But when religion tries to exceed these external, rather rigidly formulated ethical and intellectual creeds and rites and rituals, and to aspire towards a direct

1. Ibid., p. 300.

2. Ibid., p. 300.

3. Ibid., p. 300.

4. Ibid, p. 301.

5. Ibid., p. 301.

6. Ibid., p. 301.

7. Ibid., p. 302.

8. Ibid., p. 303.

"adoration of soul towards the Divine, the Self, the Supreme, the Eternal, the Infinite",¹ and makes an effort to "get close to and live with that or in that or to enjoy in love and be like or one with that which we adore",² it begins to reach a level and a height where much of the difference between it and poetry falls away, for "poetry also on its heights turns to the same things in ourselves and the world, not indeed with religious adoration, but by a regarding closeness and moved oneness in beauty and delight".³

In this way, Sri Aurobindo builds up the interesting - though, on the face of it, paradoxical - thesis that so long as we keep ourselves on the lower levels of Truth, we observe a whole world of difference between the truth of poetry, on the one hand, and that of philosophy, science and religion, on the other, but the moment we reach the utmost heights, we perceive that the differences melt away and dissolve into this fundamental truth that essentially both the substance and the style of all our philosophical, scientific and religious activities are intuitive and poetic. The culmination of all these seemingly opposite powers and modes of knowledge is reached in the poetry which lies at the core of each. And we are, in a way, reminded here of the famous observation of Wordsworth that poetry is "the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science" and "the breath and finer spirit of knowledge" itself. Though Wordsworth's perception of the thing is not as spiritually high and profound and subtle and satisfying as Sri Aurobindo's, yet we cannot fail to see that he has reached a point in experience and consciousness which releases man from the cramping prison bars of intellectual and moral thought and enables him to breathe and live freely in the liberated and liberating spaces of the spirit. We also begin to appreciate the observations of Arnold when he said, "the strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry...without poetry our science will appear incomplete";⁴ and though like T. S. Eliot we may rightly dismiss his suggestion that "most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry" inasmuch as nothing really can be a substitute

1. Ibid., p. 303.

2. Ibid., p. 303.

3. Ibid., p. 303.

4. Arnold : op. cit., pp. 1-2.

for another in the scheme of Nature and things, yet Arnold, too, here seems to be giving expression to the truth, faintly perceived by him, that there comes a point in our experience or realisation when at the end religion and philosophy, science and poetry "begin to approach each other and touch".¹ This is a truth which was pre-eminently realised in the ancient Indian culture, for there we find that "philosophy, psychic and spiritual science and religion are...woven into one unity, and when they turn to the expression of their most intimate experience, it is always the poetic word which they use".²

Thus, says Sri Aurobindo, "one may almost, though not quite, say that there is nothing in infinite Truth that the poet cannot make his material, even if it seems to belong to other provinces of the mind, because all forms of human experience approach each other on their sides of intuition and inner life and vision and all meet in the spirit".³ There is only one condition and limitation to it though that, he admits, means enormously much, - "the necessity of the purely poetic way of seeing and the subjection of the thing seen to the law of poetic harmony and moved delight and beauty".⁴

Indeed, this is a quite crucial condition and distinctly marks off the poetic way of seeing from all other important perceptions. "The poet-seer", Sri Aurobindo emphasises more than once, "sees differently, thinks in another way, voices himself in quite another manner than the philosopher or the prophet. The prophet announces the Truth as the word of God or his command, he is the giver of the message, the poet shows us Truth in its power of beauty, in its symbol or image, or reveals it to us in the workings of Nature or in the workings of life, and when he has done that, his whole work is done; he need not be its explicit spokesman. The philosopher's business is to discriminate Truth and put its parts and aspects into intellectual relation with each other; the poet's is to seize and embody aspects of Truth in their living relations, or rather, - for that is too philosophical a language - to see her features and, excited by the vision, create in the beauty of her image".⁵ It must be "vision

1. *F.P.*, p. 303.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 303.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 307.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 307.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

pouring itself into thought-images and not thought trying to observe truth and distinguish".¹ The fact is no doubt very difficult. Even Lucretius and Virgil could not get over this difficulty completely, for, as Sri Aurobindo rightly says, "Lucretius's work lives only, in spite of the majestic energy behind it, by its splendid digressions into pure poetry, Virgil's Georgics by fine passages and pictures of Nature and beauties of word and image, but its substance is lifeless matter which has floated to us on the stream of Time saved for the beauty of its setting. India, and perhaps India alone, had managed once or twice to turn this kind of philosophic attempt into a poetic success, in the Gita, in the Upanishads and some minor works modelled upon them".² There is, therefore, no question of philosophy or science or religion being superior to, or more satisfying than, poetry or *vice versa*. What is important is to be truly and distinctly aware of the aim and function, and particularly, the mode of action and expression of each, and not to confuse one with the other and thus break the law of truth operating in a separate manner in each domain. As such, once the secret of "the purely poetic way of seeing and the subjection of the thing seen to the law of poetic harmony and moved delight and beauty" is learnt and mastered, there is no reason why a poet should not cast his net as large and wide as he can and find to his growing delight that all of the infinite Truth is poetic truth and a fit subject matter of poetry. Only whatever his subject-matter, his function is "not to teach truth of any particular kind, nor indeed to teach at all, nor to pursue knowledge, nor to serve any religious or ethical aim, but to embody beauty in the word and give delight".³ At the same time, it is or should be, at any rate, part of his highest function "to serve the spirit and to illumine and lead through beauty and build by a high informing and revealing delight the soul of man".⁴ Indeed, believing, as he does, that "the true creator, the true hearer of poetry is the soul", it is but natural that Sri Aurobindo should consider even the highest poetic truth to be the spiritual truth,—spiritual, of course in its widest all-embracing sense, and not in the conventional and ex-

1. Ibid., p. 44.

2. Ibid., pp. 44-45.

3. Ibid., p. 307.

4. Ibid., pp. 307-308.

clusive ascetic sense—, and look upon poetry as “one of the high and beautiful powers of our inner and may be a power of our inmost life”.¹

The poetic truth is, thus, a thing of the highest heights and largest vistas and deepest depths including of course, the “lowest Tartarean clot of Hell”² within and the grossest and vilest reality of life which we so much see around us. It is in “the universal light” of “the sun of poetic truth” that the poet creates. As Sri Aurobindo reminds us picturesquely, “the Veda speaks in one of its symbolic hints of the fountain of eternal Truth round which stand the illumined powers of thought and life. There under the eyes of delight and the face of the imperishable beauty of the Mother of creation and bride of the eternal Spirit they lead their immortal dance. The poet visits that marvellous source of his superconscious mind and brings to us some strain or some vision of her face and works. To find the way into that circle with the waking self is to be the seer-poet and discover the highest power of the inspired word, the mantra”.³ And so while it is given to nearly each poet worth his salt to catch this or that isolated ray of this eternal universal “sun of poetic truth”, “one or two may perhaps be strong enough to look with unblinded eyes into the source of all light, see that splendour which is its happiest form of all, to which approaching or entering one can say “He am I”, discover the identity of his spirit with all things and find in that oneness the word of light which can most powerfully illumine our human utterance”.⁴

(ii) LIFE

There is a very deep, almost an integral connection in poetry between truth and life and beauty and delight. Indeed, these four powers are so organically close to one another that what we know as poetry is really a delicately and subtly balanced synthesis of them. The eye of criticism, however, has to separate them for the purpose of getting a clearer understanding of each one of them as well as the whole synthetic product. But even the proper critical seeing should be something unified and

1. Ibid., p. 308.

2. Ibid., p. 310.

3. Ibid., p. 312.

4. Ibid., p. 310.

synthetic, i.e., poetic and not entirely intellectually and logically separative. Here, too, a delicate balance is a necessity.

It is with such a delicately balanced critical seeing that Sri Aurobindo makes a study of these fundamental powers of poetry and also shows us the basic operative principle subsisting in them and governing the precise nature of their inter-relationship. As he says, “The enlightening power of the poet’s creation is vision of truth, its moving power is a passion of beauty and delight, but its sustaining power and that which makes it great and vital is the breath of life.”

Hence the paramount importance of the life-power in poetry. Indeed, “a poetry which is all thought and no life or a thought which does not constantly keep in touch with and refresh itself from the fountains of life, even if it is something more than a strong, elegant or cultured philosophising or moralising in skilled verse, even if it has vision and intellectual beauty, suffers always by lack of fire and body, wants perfection of grasp and does not take full hold on the inner being to seize and uplift as well as sweeten and illumine, as poetry should do and all great poetic writing does”.¹ In an age of intellect, such as the one through which we are passing, there is always the danger of sacrificing life for the sake of having more and more of thought and criticism and understanding. The very outlook of the modern man, including the modern poet, has become intellectual and critical. Also, when we try to turn inward in our understanding of ourselves and the world around us, we are likely to get so self-absorbed and subjective in our outlook that we may not only lose touch with life around us but also find that most of our subjective impressions and findings are thought-abstractions, divorced from life and vitality, and have, thus, only a diluted substance of reality in them. That is why Sri Aurobindo reminds us that even when the poet is most absorbed in thinking, his function “is still to bring out not merely the truth and interest, but the beauty and power of the thought, its life and emotion, and not only to do that, not only to make the thought a beautiful and living thing, but to make it one thing with life”.²

Such being the basic fact, let us, then, try to under-

1. *F.P.*, p. 315.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 315.

stand "the full extent of our meaning when we say.... that the poet's first concern and his concern always is with living beauty and reality, with life".¹

As in the case of truth, so in that of life, Sri Aurobindo would have the poet keep the widest, largest and most comprehensive possible conception in view. "As we can say that the truth with which poetry is touched, is an infinite truth, all the truth that lives in the eternal and universal, and fills, informs, vivifies, holds and shapes the spirit and form of creation, so we may say too that the life, something of which the poet has to re-embody in the beauty of the word, is all life, the infinite life of the spirit thrown out in many creations".²

What are the implications of this observation ?

"The poet's business most really, most intimately is not with the outward physical life as it is or the life of the passions and emotions only for its own sake or even with ideal life imaged by the mind or some combining and new shaping of these things into a form of beauty, but with the life of the soul and with these other things only as its expressive forms."³ We saw in the preceding section that poetry is concerned with infinite truth, all truth. It may be the truth of philosophy or of science or of religion or the ordinary common man's truth. But the poet's way of perception and expression is different. It is largely intuitive and, at the very highest, spiritual. It is only when the poet sees with the power of the spirit that he sees all truth as one. The scientist, the philosopher and the man of religion, too, see all truth as one only when they transcend the limits of the mind and begin to perceive things intuitively and spiritually. On the large intuitive, spiritual plane of perception not only all the various familiar modes of knowing, like the philosophic and scientific, moral and religious and, of course, poetic get fused and united, revealing the face of Truth as one, but new modes of knowing like the psychic, overmental and even supramental, begin to grow and develop with the result that both the infinite and eternal aspects of Truth begin to get clearer and clearer to the transformed human consciousness. That is to say, it is only when one's conception of Truth becomes in the highest sense spiritual that its infinity as well as eternity grows

1. Ibid, p. 315.

2. Ibid., p. 315.

3. Ibid., pp. 315-16.

truly real. In the same way, we can understand the infinity of life, as also its eternity, only when we have learnt to look at life from the spiritual plane. The basic life is, therefore, the life of the spirit, of the soul, just as the basic truth is the truth of the soul. And the physical, the vital and emotional and the intellectual and ideal life or a combination of all these modes of life into some compounded way of living—all these constitute but the "expressive forms" of the spiritual life, just as the philosophic, scientific, religious and poetic modes of truth are but the different expressive forms of the spiritual truth.

The true, the basic, the eternal life, therefore, is the life of the soul, and the physical, vital and mental lives are but the expressions of this basic spiritual life. It is in this spiritual sense, therefore, that Sri Aurobindo understands 'life' when he speaks of it in connection with poetry, for it is only in this sense, truly speaking, that all life becomes infinite life. Let the poet, then, not get confined to the outward physical life only as we usually see it but discover the spiritual basis or truth underlying it, that is to say, see the very soul-life which is the source of this physical living. Let him not get confined to the life of the passions and emotions only in the belief that it is this life which is man's true inner life and, therefore, the only proper domain of poetry. Let him also not get confined to some ideal life as imagined or fancied by the mind, for even the life conceived by the highest intellectual imagination is not the whole of life. Let him ascend still higher up or dive deeper and deeper within himself till he reaches the illimitable spaces of the spirit. It is only when he reaches these vast spaces that he can truly understand how infinite life is. It is when his consciousness or imagination becomes spiritual that he can understand the true origin of our physical, vital, mental, imaginative planes of living. All modes and planes of living now expand and unite into the illimitable oceans of the spiritual life. And thus the infinity of life becomes real to him. The basic, the central fact here, is, therefore, the spirit or the soul, as it is in the case of Truth. That is why Sri Aurobindo says that no doubt it is that "poetry is the rhythmic voice of life" but "it is one of the inner and not one of the surface voices".¹ If we remain confined to the surface only—and all our physical, vital, sensuous and intellectually imaginative and ideal lives,

1. Ibid, p. 316.

though in different ways and degrees are, truly speaking, surface livings only until they are touched, illuminated and transformed by the life of the spirit, the poetry that will come out of it will not be deep and abiding and all-embracing, i.e., all-life poetry. Poetry is to be vitalised, therefore, more and more increasingly and intensely by this inner spiritual life, in order to become the true "rhythmic voice of life". "And the more of this inner truth of his function the poet brings out in his work, the greater is his creation."¹ It does not matter much whether his method is professedly objective or subjective or whether he is outwardly concerned with "the individual or the group soul or the soul of Nature or mankind or the eternal and universal spirit in them".²

For the poet to take interest in this fundamental soul-life as the only true poetic life is something which has no doubt happened gradually, in successive stages, till he has reached the present-day stage of a wide conscious awareness of it. But it is something which has been, at least with the greatest poets, always there. If we look back historically we find that "mankind in its development seems to begin with the most outward things and go always more and more inward in order that the race may mount to greater heights of the spirit's life".³ It is not surprising, therefore, if early poetry is "occupied with a simple, natural, straightforward, external presentation of life".⁴ Homeric poetry is mostly of this kind. Not that there is no thought in it but the striking fact about Homer is that he "thinks only by the way", for he is "carried constantly forward in the stream of his strenuous action" and he "casts out as he goes only so much of surface thought and character and feeling as obviously emerges in a strong and single and natural speech and action".⁵ But is it all merely external action and external character and feeling and thought that we get in his poetry? Certainly not. For it is "not merely the vivid incident and picturesque surrounding circumstance"⁶ which makes the *Odyssey* a great poem but truly speaking "the adventures and trials and strength and

1. *F.P.*, p. 316.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 316.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 316.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 316.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 316.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 317.

age of the soul of man in Odysseus".¹ The same is true of the *Iliad*. It is "not merely the action and stir of battle" in it which explains its greatness but "the clash of great and strong spirits with the gods leaning down to participate in their struggle".² Similarly, what we truly find in Shakespeare is that the outward form of his work is "a surge of emotion and passion and thought and act and event arising out of character at ferment in the yeast of feeling and passion",³ but it has an inner life too and "it is its living interpretation of the truth and powers of the life-soul of man that are the core of greatness of his work"⁴ and the rest is nothing more than "a vain brute turmoil".⁵ And it is "the absence or defect of this greater element"⁶ which makes "the immense inferiority of the rest of Elizabethan dramatic work".⁷ We may, therefore, rightly say that whatever the outward form or nature of poetry, it is essentially "a self-expressive power of the spirit".⁸ At least this is so with the greatest poetry of every age, where the fullest achievement of the poet's function has been possible because it is the soul, and not merely the outward form, of things which has been "most revealed in its very life by the rhythmic word".⁹

The difficulty of providing with spontaneity such a soul-life to the rhythmic word really begins when in course of evolution man enters more and more the age of intellectual thought and analytical logical reasoning, and it increases as the reign of intellectual thought "becomes more sovereign, and imperative".¹⁰ For, so long as the poet's medium "is the outward life of things or the surface inward life of things or the surface inward life of the passions and emotions, he is moving in a strong and fresh natural element and in an undivided wholeness of the inner and outer man";¹¹ consequently, "his work, given the native power in him, has all the vitality of a

1. Ibid., p. 317.
2. Ibid., p. 317.
3. Ibid., p. 317.
4. Ibid., p. 317.
5. Ibid., p. 317.
6. Ibid., p. 317.
7. Ibid., p. 317.
8. Ibid., p. 317.
9. Ibid., p. 317.
10. Ibid., p. 317.
11. Ibid., p. 317.

thing fully felt and lived".¹ But intellect is a different and separative power. It "makes a sort of scission in our being".² And the result is that when it becomes dominant, there is the vital urge carrying on life, on one side of the line, and on the other side, there is "the deliberate detached reason trying to observe it, take an intelligent view and extract from it all its thought-values".³ Naturally, the poet, "as a child of the age and one of its voices, is moved to follow this turn".⁴ "He, too, observes life, extracts the thought values of his theme, criticises while attempting to create, or even lingers to analyse his living subject, as Browning is constantly doing with the thinking feeling mind of his characters".⁵ If, however, a balance can be maintained, as it is usually sought to be done by a classical poet, between thought and life—"the life passing into self-observing thought and the thought returning on the life to shape it in its own vital image",⁶—the poetic result is a success. Here Sri Aurobindo refers to the times of the ancient classical literature of Greece and Rome. "It has been remarked", he says, "that the just balance between thought and the living word was found by the Greeks and not again. That is perhaps an excessive affirmation, but certainly a just balance between the observing thought and life is the distinctive effort of the classical poetry and that endeavour gave it its stamp whether in Athens or Rome or in much of the epic or classical literature of ancient India." But the trouble is that to achieve such a balance is a difficult thing; it gets easily lost; and "once it has gone, thought begins to overweight life which loses its power and elan and joy".⁸ In such a situation the poet gives us, quite naturally, "more of studies of life than of creation, thought about the meaning of character and emotion and event and elaborate description rather than the living presence of these things".⁹ Instead of passion and direct feeling we have now, as a result of the chilling effect of reason,

1. Ibid., p. 317.

2. Ibid., p. 318.

3. Ibid., p. 318.

4. Ibid., p. 318.

5. Ibid., p. 318.

6. Ibid., p. 318.

7. Ibid., p. 318.

8. Ibid., p. 318.

9. Ibid., pp. 318-19.

“a play of sentiment - sentiment which is an indulgence of the intelligent observing mind in the aesthesis, the *rasa* of feeling, passion, emotion, sense thinning them away into a subtle, at the end almost unreal fineness”.¹ This is something which happened in the later part of the Indian classical Sanskrit literature. Much of the non-satirical poetry of the 18th century and reflective or ruminative poetry of the 19th century England is also poetry of sentiment of this type.

But such a thing cannot continue for long. The artifice and artificiality become too obvious to move any sensitive reader. And a reaction against thought and sentiment sets in, driving the poet back to life once again, “the natural fullness of the vital and physical life”.² But now the thing is practically impossible, for “the mind of man having got so far cannot return upon its course, undo what it has made of itself and recover the glad childhood of its early vigorous nature”.³ What is the result of such a predicament? Instead of the simplicity of spontaneous life, there is “a search after things striking, exaggerated, abnormal, violent, new, in the end a morbid fastening on perversities, on all that is ugly, glaring and coarse on the plea of their greater reality, on exaggerations of vital instinct and sensation, on physical wryness and crudities and things unhealthily strange”.⁴ Since the thought-mind loses “the natural full-blooded power of the vital being”, it “pores on these things, stimulates the failing blood with them and gives itself an illusion of some forceful sensation of living”.⁵ The picture of the artistic life of most of Western Europe, particularly England and France, after the breakdown of the nineteenth century Romantic tradition, could not have been better and more comprehensively depicted than what we get here from Sri Aurobindo’s pen. All the various well-known aesthetic schools of artists and poets, and most of the novelists of the time, particularly of the 1920’s taking the cue from them, are there before us to confirm this sharp, incisive observation of Sri Aurobindo.

With the increasingly dominant pressure of thought on our life in modern times, some of the sensitive artistic

1. Ibid., p. 319.

2. Ibid., p. 319.

3. Ibid., p. 319.

4. Ibid., p. 319.

5. Ibid., p. 319.

souls have naturally violently reacted against intellect and gone all out for life and action, physical and vital sensation. As Sri Aurobindo says, "the demand for life, for action, the tendency to a pragmatic and vitalistic view of things, a certain strenuous and even strident note has been loud enough in recent years".¹ And we are at once reminded of the enormous influence which the writings of Freud and Bergson have exercised on the European mind, and through it, on the modern world-mind too, more or less. But the wise men of today are now realising more and more that howsoever great and indispensable things, life, action, vital power are to man, "to get back to them by thinking less is a way not open to us in this age of time, even if it were a desirable remedy for our diseases of overintellectuality and a mechanised existence".² On the contrary, we cannot think less today but have to go on thinking "much more insistently, with a more packed and teeming thought, with a more eager, more absorbed hunting of the mind..."³ than the men of the earlier generations. It could not be otherwise. So "the way out lies not in cessation of thinking and the turn to a strenuous description of life, nor even in a more vitally forceful thinking, but in another kind of thought mind".⁴ We need not fight shy of intellect and thought, therefore, as D. H. Lawrence, for example, or A. E. Housman or the Surrealists seem to have done. For, "the filled activity of the thinking mind is as much part of life as that of the body and vital and emotional being, and its growth and predominance are a necessary stage of human progress and man's self-evolution".⁵ Therefore, to go back from it is impossible, and even if it were possible, it would not be really desirable. It would be really "a lapse, and not a betterment of spirit".⁶

Here is, then, a seer-mind, a being wholly steeped in the spiritual life, who is bold and courageous enough to accept all that intellectual mind has to give us today and not weak or squeamish enough to turn away from it in the belief that it is the source of all our mischief, and directly responsible for all our craze for perverse, sensa-

1. *Ibid.*, p. 319.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 319-20.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 320.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 320.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 320.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 320.

tional living today.

But this does not mean that we have to accept the life of intellect and scientific reasoning as it is or as it has come down to us all these years. On the contrary, we should now be wise enough to see that "the full thought-life does not come by the activity of the intellectual reason and its predominance".¹ Reasoning or logical thinking is but the first step by which we try to rise above "the activity and excitement and vigour of the life and the body and give ourselves a first freedom to turn to a greater and higher reach of the fullness of existence".² This "greater and higher reach of the fullness of existence" we achieve only when we try to get "above the limited crude physical mind, above the vital power and its forceful thought...and self-vision, above the intellect and its pondering and measuring reason"³ and gradually learn to "tread the illumined realm of an intuitive and spiritual thinking, an intuitive feeling, sense and vision".⁴ Now this intuitive sense or feeling or thinking is not to be confused, as it is usually done, particularly by the Western mind, with "vital intuition". It belongs to a much higher plane than that of the vital and is "a much broader, loftier, vaster and more seeing power".⁵ It belongs to what Sri Aurobindo calls "a supra-intellectual and spiritual intuition".⁶ The fact is that until we reach this plane of supra-intellectual, spiritual intuition we do not really succeed in healing "the scission between thought and life" which the intellectual reasoning mind immediately and inevitably brings about. What is more, we are now no more obliged to make a conscious attempt at a "just balance" between life and thought, action and reflection, for endowed with the supra-intellectual intuitive power of seeing, feeling and thinking we automatically and spontaneously begin to experience "a new and luminous and joyful fusion and oneness".⁷ "The spirit gives us not only a greater light of truth and vision, but the breath of a greater living; for the spirit is not only the self of our consciousness and knowledge, but the

1. Ibid., p. 320.

2. Ibid., p. 320.

3. Ibid., p. 321.

4. Ibid., p. 321.

5. Ibid., p. 321.

6. Ibid., p. 321.

7. Ibid., p. 321.

great self of life".¹ Indeed, unless we confine ourselves, under the stress of some traditional philosophical notion or religious and moral belief, to a narrow and limited area of the spiritual kingdom we shall realise that "to find our self and the self of things is not to go through a rarefied ether of thought into Nirvana, but to discover the whole greatest integral power of our complete existence".² That is to say, it is in the infinite spaces of the spirit alone, really speaking, that we can have the true experience of the fullest and completest possible existence and its joy and power and richness.

The poets who, next to the spiritual seers and prophets, are really endowed with the power to see some deeper dynamic truth of things and have some vision of the future are, therefore, the beings who have been able to perceive this deeper reality of thought-life in our times. At any rate, we would be quite justified today to attach "the greatest importance to those poets in whom there is the double seeking of this twofold power, the truth and reality of the eternal self and spirit in man and things and the insistence on life"³.

Looking back at the 19th century, "the carnival of industry and science"⁴ we find that the poets of that age, particularly of the middle period, both in England and in America, "philosophised, moralised or criticised life in energetic and telling or beautiful and attractive or competent or cultured verse".⁵ That is to say, they had quite plenty of hold on thought and intellect and made serious poetry out of this power. But they went to such an extreme in this direction that they could not "represent life with success" or interpret it "with high poetic power or inspired insight"⁶, nor were they "stirred and uplifted by any deeply great vision of truth"⁷. It was chiefly due to "the excess of reason and intellectuality"⁸ in their poetic or creative sensibility, for such an excess is hardly able to "create an atmosphere favourable to moved vision and the uplifting breath of

1. Ibid., p. 321.

2. Ibid., p. 321.

3. Ibid., p. 321.

4. Ibid., p. 313.

5. Ibid., p. 313.

6. Ibid., p. 313.

7. Ibid., p. 313.

8. Ibid., p. 313.

life".¹ And the few poets like Meredith, Swinburne, Whitman, etc., who "strained towards a nearer hold upon life" had to struggle against the brazen and heavy atmosphere of intellectual and utilitarian excess prevailing all round, and often to lash themselves into an anarchic violence of passion and verbal expression in order to achieve "the uplifting breath of life". The scission between thought and life prevailed. But as a more serious and painfully challenging awareness of this scission began to dawn upon the sensitive spirits, the poets of recent times also began to react accordingly. In any case, as stated before, the poets of our recent times who are likely to give us the greatest satisfaction in this regard and act as the pioneers for the future poetic voices are those who have been able to heal this scission between thought and life in their own experiences and consciousness and expressive power. "All the most significant and vital work in recent poetry has borne this stamp."² Even in the poetic strains of Meredith and Whitman, of the earlier generation of poets, the notes which are highest in them are the outcome of this achieved fusion. The poetry of Carpenter, A. E., Yeats, and above all, Tagore, bears this stamp quite prominently enough, though each in its own particular way and measure of success. Tagore's poetry is of special significance in this connection, for "his work is a constant music of the overpassing of the borders, a chant-filled realm in which the subtle sounds and lights of the truth of the spirit give new meanings to the finer subtleties of life".³ We do note the objection which has been made that "this poetry is too subtle and remote and goes away from the broad, near, present and vital actualities of existence".⁴ The objection is, quite obviously, to the early romantic poetry of Tagore and Yeats. But apart from the fact that here we completely forget the later poetry of both Tagore and Yeats, this is "to mistake the work of this poetry and to mistake too in a great measure the sense of life as it must reveal itself to the greating mind of humanity now that it is growing in world-knowledge and towards self-knowledge".⁵

But the most important thing to remember here is

1. *Ibid.*, p. 314.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 321.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 322.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 322.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 322.

that "these poets have not indeed done all that has to be done or given the complete poetic synthesis and fusion".¹ Their chief importance or significance lies in this that they have succeeded in creating "a new and deeper manner of seeing life"² and building "bridges of visioned light and rhythm between the infinite and eternal and the mind and soul and life of man".³ And it is now left to those poets of today who are endowed with a really serious and profound far-seeing as well as inlooking power of spiritual vision to advance from these first movements, tread by poets like Tagore and Yeats and A. E., "into new and greater ranges"⁴ and "fathom all the depths unplumbed"⁵ and bring all they can "of the power of man's greater self and the universal spirit into the broadest all of life".⁶

Unfortunately, in the world of today there has been in recent times such a phenomenal growth of communism in the political and economic and social spheres of human life that the Marxist approach to art and literature seems as well to be exercising a rather dangerous and degrading influence upon what is known as the progressive section of literary artists. The cult of Marxism in art and literature is really an extreme form of the cult of realism which has been present in the artistic and literary activity in all ages in some measure or other but appears to have invaded the later 19th century European literature with particular vehemence and we are not yet completely free from its poisoning effect. Looking upon myth and romance and supernature as the bane of the bourgeoisie mind and drawing its sustenance and motive and inspiration exclusively from life, this cult of realism and, its extreme form, Marxism, is all out for life as it is, as it is actually lived from day to day, burdened with social and economic and political tensions and clashes and has hardly any other conception, not to speak of, vision of life.

Lest the fine artistic and literary minds of today should be unwarily led away and astray by this poisonous movement of stark realism in life and art, Sri Aurobindo, it appears, devotes some direct paragraphs to this modern development in literary activity. His observations and

1. Ibid., p. 322.

2. Ibid., p. 322.

3. Ibid., p. 322.

4. Ibid., p. 323.

5. Ibid., p. 323.

6. Ibid., p. 323.

judgment on this issue are quite clear and firm and insistent and have even a sharp resonance in them. With all the emphasis he can command he tells us here that “the demand for activity and realism or for a direct, exact and forceful presentation of life in poetry proceeds upon a false sense of what poetry gives or can give us. All the highest activities of the mind of man deal with things other than the crude actuality or the direct appearance or the first rough appeal of existence”.¹ And, therefore, he reminds us that “it is no real portion of the function of art to cut out palpitating pieces from life and present them raw and smoking or well-cooked for the aesthetic digestion”.² It is not only that “all art has to give us beauty and the crude actuality of life is not often beautiful”,³ but the peculiar function of poetry among the literary forms, is to “give us a deeper reality of things and the outsides and surface faces of life are only a part of its reality and do not take us either very deep or very far”.⁴ And if we care to know what is the greatest and highest work of a poet, we should not fail to remember that it is but “to open to us new realms of vision, new realms of being, our own and the world’s”,⁵ and, what is more, “he does this even when he is dealing with actual things”.⁶ The great examples of Homer and Shakespeare whose works bubble and bristle with life, its splendours as well as its sordid realities and motives, are there to prove beyond doubt that when we look at people and life properly without putting on the blinkers of any cramping and self-limiting dogma or creed, we find that even life as we actually see it “presents to us another face and becomes something deeper than its actual present mask”.⁷ And that is why the poet “oftenest instinctively prefers to go away from the obsession of a petty actuality, from the realism of the prose of life to his inner creative self or an imaginative background of the past or the lucent air of myth or dream or into a greater outlook on the future”.⁸ That this is not a mere bourgeoisie

1. *Ibid.*, p. 323.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 323.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 323.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 323-24.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 324.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 324.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 324.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 324.

poetic activity but something which can spontaneously develop in the work of any truly sensitive and serious poet is evident from the examples of even such a Soviet writer as Boris Pasternak, and the so-called Leftist poets like Auden, Spender and C. Day Lewis. Not that poetry is quite debarred from dealing with "the present living scene . . . or even with the social or other questions and problems of the day"¹—though it may be a quite perilous task in the hands of the less wary but it can do this work "successfully only when it makes as little as possible of what belongs to the moment and time and the surface and brings out their roots of universal or eternal interest or their suggestion of great and deep things".² This is so, Sri Aurobindo would have us remember again and again, "because it is the eternal increasing soul of man and the intimate self of things and their more abiding and significant forms which are the real object of his vision".³

What we usually call our "actual life" is not, therefore, to be mistaken for the whole of life, nor are we to refuse to "take note of all that lies behind our apparent material life".⁴ As stated before, the poetic conception of life needs to be as wide and large as the vast and deep expanse of life itself. "What man sees and experiences of God and himself and his race and Nature and the spiritual, mental, psychic and material worlds in which he moves, his backlook upon the past, his sweep of vision over the present, his eye of aspiration and prophecy cast towards the future, his passion of self-finding and self-exceeding, his reach beyond the three times to the eternal and immutable, this is his real life".⁵ Indeed, if life is to be taken as it is, it is the entire gamut of it, as far as it can be conceived, which should appeal to and be accepted by, the poet. It is doubtful whether any critic of poetry either in the East or in the West has laid before the poet such a comprehensive, all-embracing view of life as Sri Aurobindo has done. Also, the profound expansion in recent times of the human consciousness and experience with the increase in the knowledge and realisation of the spiritual truth and life has added quite new dimensions

1. Ibid., p. 324.

2. Ibid., p. 325.

3. Ibid., p. 325.

4. Ibid., p. 325.

5. Ibid., p. 325.

and ranges to his conception of life. As Sri Aurobindo says, "now the mind of man is opening more largely to the deepest truth of the Divine, the self, the Spirit, the eternal Presence not separate and distant, but near us, around us and in us, the spirit in the world, the greater Self in man and his kind, the Spirit in all that is and lives, the Godhead, the Existence, the Power, the Beauty, the eternal Delight that broods over all, supports all and manifests itself in every turn of creation".¹ Consequently, the poetry which will be motivated and inspired by this vision of the Omnipresent Divine Reality is bound to give us "quite a new presentation and interpretation of life; for of itself and at the first touch this seeing reconstructs and re-images the world for us and gives us a greater sense and a vaster, subtler and profounder form of our existence".² This new, spiritually expanded and deepened view of life is also sure to produce a "deeper poetry of Nature than has yet been written".³ Then again this material, physical world of ours "cannot for very much longer be our sole or separate world of experience, . . . the partitions which divide it from psychic and other kingdoms behind it are wearing thin and voices and presences are beginning to break through and reveal their impact on our world".⁴ Naturally, all these new, unprecedented developments in the human consciousness and experience "must widen our conception of life and make a new world and atmosphere for poetry which may justify as perhaps never before the poet's refusal to regard as unreal what to the normal mind was only romance, illusion or dream".⁵ Already this has begun to influence the modernist poetic mind of the Western world and realms of magnetic mountain lying "beyond the rail-heads" of physical sense and fact are sought to be reached as emblems of the new psychic life opening to man's mental horizons. Here in our own country the immense poetry of these psychic and other spiritual kingdoms as poured out to us by Sri Aurobindo himself is inspiring a number of his disciples to write poetry of a new order with all this newly acquired vision of fresh worlds upon worlds opening to the seeing human soul. There seems

1. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 327.

to be no doubt, therefore, that "a larger field of being made more real to man's experience will be the realm of future poetry".¹

While the psychic experience of new, hitherto unknown modes and planes of being and living goes on expanding and greatening our consciousness and knowledge, the age-old spiritual truth that all life is one will also go on deepening, with the result that "the poetry which voices the oneness and totality of our being and Nature and the worlds and God, will not make the actuality of our earthly life less but more real and rich and full and wide and living to men".² Indeed, we can confirm it by our own ordinary experience that "to know other countries is not to belittle but enlarge our own country and help it to a greater power of its own being",³ and, therefore, "to know the other countries of the soul is to widen our bounds and make more opulent and beautiful the earth on which we live".⁴

To sum up then: the experience and conception of life by the poets of such a developed life-and-mind-and-soul-consciousness are going to be infinitely rich and complex and profound, in fact, an illimitable cosmic one. The prospect of achievement by these poetic seers, as held forth by Sri Aurobindo, is indeed, a very thrilling one.

"This poetry will present to us . . . in forms of power and beauty all the actual life of man, his wonderful and fruitful past, his living and striving present, his yet more living aspiration and hope of the future, but will present it more seeingly as the life of the vast self and spirit within the race and the veiled divinity in the individual . . . in the presence and intimacy of Nature, in harmony with the beauty and wonder of the realms that stretch out beyond earth and its life, in the march to Godhead . . . in the ever clearer letters and symbols of the self-revealing mystery and not only in its first crude and incomplete actualities . . . This poetry will be the voice and rhythmic utterance of our greater, our total, our infinite existence, and will give us the strong and infinite sense, the spiritual and vital joy, the exalting power of a greater breath of life".⁵

1. *Ibid.*, p. 327.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 328.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 328.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 328.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 329-30.

(iii) and (iv) **BEAUTY AND DELIGHT**

We are all familiar with the famous observation of Keats: “A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.” Beauty and joy, therefore, go together. It should be common enough experience. Yet we find that “they are often enough separated in our cruder vital and mental experience”.¹ But as far as the artist or the poet is concerned, Sri Aurobindo has no doubt that to him, “these two fundamental things tend to be one”.² What is more, “these twin powers meet, make a consonance of the perfect harmony of his work and are the first deities he serves, all the others only group themselves about them”.³ Deities like truth and life, for example, have to make themselves acceptable to beauty and delight before “they can mix with them in a compelling and attracting oneness”.⁴ Not only this, as Sri Aurobindo says and we also know it from our experience, “for the poet the moon of beauty and delight is a greater God-head even than the sun of truth or the breath of life”.⁵ And no wonder, for when we go within and look inward, we cannot fail to realise, like the Vedic and Upanishadic poet-seers of old, that “Delight is the soul of existence, (and) beauty the intense impression, the concentrated form of delight”.⁶ The poet is able to create a thing of beauty, for it is his feeling of joy or delight within which spontaneously takes on that expression, and this is why to the reader or hearer too, the subtle current or vibration of delight which he feels in response to it is never really separate from the form of beauty which that subtle expressive vibration naturally and organically goes on creating in his consciousness.

In Sri Aurobindo’s poetics, therefore, these two aspects of poetry are not separated—and if ever separated, it is so done only in name and for the sake of the convenient understanding of the reader. The two -beauty and delight- are always experienced and treated by him as one organically unified power of poetry.

Now, their importance does not merely lie in the fact

1. Ibid., p. 331.

2. Ibid., p. 331.

3. Ibid., p. 331.

4. Ibid., p. 331.

5. Ibid., p. 331.

6. Ibid., p. 331.

that without them the very creative impulse behind poetry gets atrophied or dead but "the light of truth, the breath of life (as treated in the earlier sections), great and potent things though they are, are insufficient to give poetry the touch of immortality and perfection . . . unless the soul and form of delight and beauty take possession of the seeing of truth and give immortality to the breath and body of the life".¹ That is to say, without beauty and delight poetry cannot become enduring, popular and perfect, howsoever full of wisdom and understanding or depth of intuitive thinking or infinite life and vitality it may be.

The fundamental fact being so, we are apt to think that every poet as well as every sensitive appreciator of his work knows what beauty and delight are. But this is not so. Of course, we all have a native, inborn sense of beauty and delight. As Sri Aurobindo says, "in its origin this seeking for beauty is not rational; it springs from the roots of our life, it is an instinct and an impulse, an instinct of aesthetic satisfaction and an impulse of aesthetic creation and enjoyment".² If so, we need not hesitate to admit that like the origins of many things in us, indeed our life itself, "this instinct and impulse begin with much imperfection and impurity and with great crudities both in creation and appreciation".³ And so when in course of our evolutionary growth and progress we mature in our life of intellect, "the reason comes in to distinguish, to enlighten, to correct, to point out the deficiencies and the crudities, to lay down laws of aesthetics and to purify our appreciation and our creation by improved taste and knowledge".⁴ In this way, we develop with the help of the power of intellectual reasoning "an aesthetic conscience". "That which was an obscure and erratic activity, it (i.e., reasoning) makes self-conscious and rationally discriminative in its work and enjoyment".⁵

But if we are sensitive and careful enough, it does not take us long to realise that the aesthetic conscience or taste induced in us by reason or intellect does not take us very far or high. Soon we begin to discover that

1. Ibid., p. 331.

2. *The Human Cycle*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1949, p. 168.

3. Ibid., p. 168.

4. Ibid., p. 168.

5. Ibid., p. 169.

"where the greatest and most powerful creation of beauty is accomplished and its appreciation and enjoyment rise to the highest pitch, the rational is always surpassed and left behind ..(and that) the creation of beauty in poetry and art does not fall within the sovereignty or even within the sphere of the reason".¹ On the contrary, we begin to realise more and more that "the intellect is not the poet, the artist, the creator within us"; for, "creation comes by a suprarational influx of light and power which must work always, if it is to do its best, by vision and inspiration".² At any rate, "Genius, the true creator, is always suprarational in its nature and its instrumentation even when it seems to be doing the work of the reason".³ As such, we begin to realise gradually and increasingly that the beauty which the artist or the poet seeks is not a mere physical or sensuous or even intellectual beauty or "the formal beauty alone or the beauty of proportion and right process which is what the sense and the reason seek", but "the soul of beauty which is hidden from the ordinary eye and the ordinary mind"⁴ and comes by a psychic or spiritual vision and inspiration alone. And the same is true of the resultant artistic delight.

This does not, however, mean that the poet is wholly carried away by some invisible, mysterious power over which he has absolutely no control and works under the pressure or impulsion of another instinctive movement within him. What happens is that he now begins to develop in him the power of intuition or some higher inspiration and illumination which is not to be confused with the workings of our cruder physical and vital instincts and impulses. This new power is a highly conscious and dynamic and powerful power of creation. And he also develops a new sense of discrimination and judgment. Only "this discrimination is not that of the critical intellect".⁵ As a matter of fact, "it exists in the very nature and truth of the thing itself, the creation itself, in its secret inner law of beauty and harmony which can be seized by vision, not by intellectual analysis".⁶ As

1. Ibid., p. 169.

2. Ibid., p. 169.

3. Ibid., p. 169.

4. Ibid., p. 171.

5. Ibid., p. 173.

6. Ibid., p. 173.

this experience grows and enlarges itself in the artist's being, the new truth begins to be more and more firmly and vividly established in him that the fine subtle power of discrimination which constantly works within him is not the result of any intellectual self-criticism or an obedience to rules imposed on him from outside by any intellectual canons; on the contrary, it is "itself creative, intuitive, a part of the vision, involved in and inseparable from the act of creation".¹ What is needed, therefore, is the awakening of this vision, insight and intuitive response in the soul.

Sri Aurobindo sums up this basic and most revealing point with an easy eloquence thus: "The search for beauty is only in its beginnings a satisfaction in the beauty of form, the beauty which appeals to the physical senses and the vital impressions, impulsions, desires. It is only in the middle a satisfaction in the beauty of the ideas seized, the emotions aroused, the perception of perfect process and harmonious combination. Behind them the soul of beauty in us desires the contact, the revelation, the uplifting delight of an absolute beauty in all things which it feels to be present, but which neither the senses and instincts by themselves can give, though they may be its channels,—for it is suprasensuous, nor the reason and intelligence, though they too are a channel,—for it is suprarational, supraintellectual,—but to which through all these veils the soul itself seeks to arrive. When it can get the touch of this universal, absolute beauty, this soul of beauty, this sense of its revelation in any slightest or greatest thing, the beauty of a flower, a form, the beauty and power of a character, an action, an event, a human life, an idea, a stroke of the brush or the chisel or a scintillation of the mind, the colours of a sunset or the grandeur of the tempest, it is then that the sense of beauty in us is really, powerfully, entirely satisfied. It is, in truth, seeking, as in religion, for the Divine, the all-Beautiful in man, in nature, in life, in thought, in art; for God is Beauty and Delight hidden in the variation of his masks and forms.... To find highest beauty is to find God; to reveal, to embody, to create, as we say, highest beauty, is to bring out of our souls the living image and power of God."²

And the same thing is true of delight. We have

1. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 177-78.

usually to pass through these very stages of the experience of the physical and sensuous, the intellectual and imaginative and finally the psychic and spiritual delight in order to realise the true and universal soul of delight in all its infinite widths and heights and depths. And here, too, we cannot help saying that to find highest delight is to find God. And as to the way this power of delight works at its best in poetry we have already noted in an earlier chapter that.... "poetry has not really done its work, at least its highest work, until it has raised the pleasure of the instrument (i.e., the physical senses, the intelligence, the intellect and the imagination, etc.) and transmuted it into the deeper delight of the soul". Essentially speaking, the poetic or artistic delight is "not merely a godlike pastime" but "a great formative and illuminative power".

Unfortunately, this deep spiritual view of beauty and delight in art or poetry, or, for the matter of that, in life, has been lost sight of in our modern critical, intellectual age. This is a deficiency which has brought about quite a big difference between the modern materialistic man with his low vulgar and utilitarian artistic taste and the ancient cultured man with his high aesthetic taste and spiritual sense and wisdom. "The ancient communities who created those fine many-sided cultures which still remain the fountain-head of all our evolving civilisation, had the instinct for beauty, the aesthetic turn of the temperament and formation of the mind almost, it would seem, from the beginning, planted in their spirit and their blood, colouring their outlook so that even before they got the developed intellectual consciousness of it, they created instinctively in the spirit and form of beauty."¹ And this is quite half the secret of the eternal charm and power of their poetry and art. In modern times we have separated the religious and the philosophic from the aesthetic sense but in the ancient religious and philosophical writings of India, like the Vedas and the Upanishads, for example, the miraculous achievement is the "perfect union of beauty and power and truth, the word of truth coming out spontaneously as a word of beauty...."² And "this high achievement was not surprising in these ancient deep thinking men who discovered the profound truth that all existence derives from

1. *F.P.*, p. 332.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 333.

and lives by the bliss of the eternal spirit, in the power of a universal delight, Ananda".¹ This worship of beauty and delight as something divine got so ingrained in their very blood and spirit that even when the Indian mind became intellectually conscious afterwards and later on gave birth to what we call classical literature and art, the spiritual-aesthetic strain is present there always. Indeed, "the expression of the spiritual through the aesthetic sense is the constant sense of Indian art, as it is also the inspiring motive of a great part of the later religion and poetry".² Similarly, "Japan and China, more specially perhaps southern China, . . . had in a different way this fusion of the spiritual and aesthetic mind and it is a distinguishing stamp of their art and culture".³ The Persian had a sort of sensuous magic of the transforming aesthesis born of psychic delight and vision. Ancient Greece did all its work of founding European civilisation by a union of a subtle and active intelligence with a fine aesthetic spirit and worship of beauty. The Celtic nations again seem always to have had by nature a psychic delicacy and subtlety united with an instinctive turn for imaginative beauty to which we owe much of the finer strain in English literature".⁴ But afterwards this fine aesthetic spirit languishes or "works with a certain effort and is clogged by many heavier elements which are in conflict with and prevent the sureness of the aesthetic perception".⁵ And as to the progressive modern mind, inheritor of all this past, it is "a divided and complex mind" which strives at its best to recover the old synthetic spiritual-aesthetic spirit on a larger scale, but is not yet able to do so. To add to the difficulty of the task, it is "still labouring under the disadvantage of its aberration into a mechanical, economical, materialistic, utilitarian civilisation from which it cannot get free. . . ." ⁶ And the result is that there is an almost "naked and unashamed riot of ugliness" ⁷ and vulgarity without any prickings of the spiritual conscience.

But this inescapable ugliness and vulgarity has got to

1. Ibid., p. 333.

2. Ibid., p. 333.

3. Ibid., p. 333.

4. Ibid., p. 334.

5. Ibid., p. 334.

6. Ibid., pp. 334-35.

7. Ibid., p. 335.

go and the poets and artists, above all others, have to get back the spirit of the worship of the true and not debased and perverted delight and beauty, otherwise "there can be neither an assured nobility and sweetness in poetry and art, nor a satisfied dignity and fullness of life nor a harmonious perfection of the spirit".¹

A mere recovery of the aesthetic imaginative delight and beauty, however, will not do. The recovery must be made first and last on the spiritual plane, as was the case in the ancient times. Our great ancestors took the greatest interest, above all, in the reality of the inner spirit, the Atman, the Tao, and treated life and the world as its field of expression and self-experience. But modern man looks little into his deepest self, has hardly an interest or even belief in the reality of his soul. Instead of concentrating on the truth and beauty and delight of life, he is immersed in the material, practical and technological uses of its hidden powers and resources mostly for political and social and economic purposes. Or, it is the dark obscure mazes of his own divided, distracted mind and the agonising conflicts and tensions of his split nervous and emotional being in which he finds himself completely lost. As the very social and psychological circumstances and purposes of living have changed, quite naturally the aesthetic attitude too has undergone a basic change. The fine aesthetic sense and intelligence is now "condemned to serve first and foremost our external interest in life or our interest in thought or in troubled personality or the demand of the senses or passion and bidden to make them beautiful or vivid to us by an active aesthetic cerebration and artistic manufacture of the word or a supply of carefully apt or beautiful forms and measures".² Things have got topsyturvied; the secondary ones are put in the first rank, and "the primary, the one thing needful, has to get in as best it can to give some firm base to the creation".³

In order to set things right, therefore, we have to return to the very roots of our life and artistic creation. And one of the primary truths which we have to recover is that "there is a profound intrinsic delight and beauty in all things and behind all experience whatever face it

1. Ibid, p. 335.

2. Ibid., p. 337.

3. Ibid., p. 337.

wears to the surface mind...."¹ But this is, obviously, a spiritual truth. And so the poets have to realise once again that it is "this deeper spiritual feeling, this Ananda" which is "the fountain of poetic delight and beauty".² This is a feeling of Ananda which "springs from a supreme essence of experience, a supreme aesthesis which is in its own nature spiritual, impersonal, independent of the personal reactions and passions of the mind".³ It is by means of this fine impersonal psychic feeling that "the poet is able to transmute pain and sorrow and the most tragic and terrible and ugly things into forms of beauty".⁴ Therefore, as "the subject of the poet is all that he can feel of the infinite truth of God and Nature and our own and the world's being, so too what he brings out from his subjects is all that he can pour into speech of his vision of eternal and universal beauty, all that he can express of the soul's universal delight in existence".⁵ Above all, he has to remember that "this Ananda is not the pleasure of a mood or a sentiment or the fine aesthetic indulgence of the sense in the attraction of a form....but the enduring delight which, as the ancient idea justly perceived, is the essence of spirit and being and the beauty which all things assume when the spirit lives in the pure joy of creation and experience".⁶

Now, does this universality of beauty and delight mean that we are to take whatever we will, straight from life and experience, just as it is? Does this mean that the poet's task is only to make whatever he gets in actual life and experience "precise and vivid through word and image or dressing it in imaginative colour to achieve poetic effect and beauty"?⁷ Unfortunately, as Sri Aurobindo points out, this is the kind of theory which seems to govern and guide a good deal of poetry at the present time. He has, therefore, to point out clearly that this is an error, for this means "confusing the sources of poetic delight and beauty with the more superficial interest, pain and pleasure which the modern mind takes in the first untransmuted appeal of thought and

1. Ibid., p. 337.

2. Ibid., p. 338.

3. Ibid., p. 338.

4. Ibid., p. 338.

5. Ibid., p. 338.

6. Ibid., p. 338.

7. Ibid., p. 339.

life and feeling".¹ The poet, on the contrary, should be able to know better and react to these normal human interests differently. The fact is that he has in him "a double personality"² and "a double instrument of his response to life and existence".³ "There is", for instance, "in him the normal man absorbed in the mere living who thinks and feels and acts like others, and there is the seer of things, the supernormal man, the super-soul or delight-soul in touch with the impersonal and eternal fountains of joy and beauty who creates from that source and transmutes by its alchemy all experience into a form of the spirit's Ananda."⁴ He has to be on his guard, therefore, lest "this deeper and greater power" of his personality should get subjected to the normal practical self. But when he remains faithful to "the genius in him", to "the super-soul or delight-soul" that he truly is, and succeeds in "sinking the mental and vital interests in a deeper soul experience",⁵ he is easily able to bring out in his works "the inevitable word and the supreme form and the unanalysable rhythm."⁶ He then grows into "something more than a maker of beautiful word and phrase, a favoured child of the fancy and imagination, a careful fashioner of idea and utterance of an effective poetic thinker, moralist, dramatist or storyteller".⁷ Ultimately, he "becomes a spokesman of the eternal spirit of beauty and delight and shares that highest creative and self-expressive rapture which is close to the original ecstasy that made existence, the divine Ananda".⁸ It is perhaps at such a moment that he realises the fuller and deeper implications of what Keats meant when he wrote in a letter that "with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration".⁹ He now perceives everywhere, as Yeats did, "Eternal beauty wandering on her way."

1. Ibid., p. 339.

2. Ibid., p. 339.

3. Ibid., p. 339.

4. Ibid., pp. 339-40.

5. Ibid., p. 340.

6. Ibid., p. 340.

7. Ibid., p. 340.

8. Ibid., p. 340.

9. Letter to George and Thomas Keats, 21 December 1817. Quoted in *The World of Poetry*, p. 59.

Thus Sri Aurobindo would have the poets and artists of today remember always and without any shadow of doubt that "the seer, the poet, the artist, the children of the spirit's light and intuition are only true to themselves when they live in the depth of the soul, refuse to be hurried away by the surface call of mind and life and wait rather for their own greater voices".¹ It is only by living thus "in the depths of the soul" and "waiting for their own greater voices", that they will be able to turn even the things of the mental and vital interest, pleasure, pain of thought, life, action etc. into a living spiritual experience. Romantic poetry as well as romantic poetic criticism lays much stress on human passions and feelings. But truly speaking, these passions and feelings can "change into poetic matter only when they have been spiritualised"² enough and undergone the purification, the *katharsis*, spoken of by the Greek critic. The life values become truly poetic when they have come out purified and heightened and transformed into soul values.

Let us pause here a little and briefly examine this Kathartic principle in art and poetry. It is easily seen how the mind in aesthetic experience escapes its everyday disposition to take a personal and practical interest in the world. Following the Indian aestheticians Bharata, Abhinavagupta, Mammata, Visvanātha etc. we may observe that the mind in this mood realises its essential nature. "Rasa is realisation of one's own consciousness as coloured by emotions", says Bharata (*Nāṭya Sāstra* 6-35). And Visvanātha in *Sāhityadarpaṇa* (3-35) tells us, "Rasa is identical with the taste of one's own blissful self." Since the Indian aestheticians held the disinterested self-consciousness to be of the nature of God (Brahman), they said that *rasa* is an experience akin to that of God or ultimate Reality. But this was mostly in theory, for in actual practice we hardly find those classical Indian poetic critics exploring the divine aspect of the poetic pleasure or suggesting to the poets of their time that this was the kind of ultimate *rasa* which they were to communicate through their poetry. However, we see that the aestheticians both in the East and in the West lay a good deal of stress on the Kathartic aspect of art and poetry, though ordinarily they do not raise

1. *F.P.*, p. 341.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 342.

Katharsis or *Rasa* to the spiritual plane of experience. Their broad argument is that the self degenerates as man takes too much real interest in the world and gets involved in it. The mind then loses its native joy and freedom. The remedy is art where the mind is made self-aware and free from any objective necessity. The mind then gets a temporary relief from its tension and outward pressure. This experience is blissful and acts as a restorative for it which emerges with an exalted serenity and self-knowledge. This is the cathartic action of drama and this accounts for the "proper pleasure" spoken of by Aristotle and the "extraordinary charm" by Abhinavagupta.¹

Thus, according to these aestheticians, the purificatory action of art lies in purifying the mind of its egotistic-pragmatic attachment to the world and bringing it to its own inherent state of freedom and bliss, for the essential nature of mind is something which is contemplative, joyous and free.

But it appears that there is too much of the intellectual and psychological action involved in this purifying process. As Dr. Choudhry says in the same article, "The secret (i.e. of aesthetic delight) is the intellectual operation involved in aesthetic experience where the emotions are evoked in the mind through suggestion. The mind concerns itself with the intelligible essence or meaning of the emotion. For this is alone the object intended or meaning signified by drama where everything that figures, — the characters, their speeches, actions and other physical manifestations like smiles and tears, and their background—is representative and symbolical in nature, referring beyond them to some meaning which is necessarily some generic essence."² And again he says, referring to the ideal nature of the representation of life in a tragedy, "Thus it is that poetry is most philosophical and its function is to reveal to man's reason the forms of emotions which colour and mark different aspects of his life. And since reason is the noblest portion of man's soul and knowledge his highest good attended with purest joy, tragedy that leads his mind to see into the forms of such important aspects of life as marked

1. Dr. P. J. Choudhry: "Catharsis in the Light of Indian Aesthetics" published in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, U.S.A., Vol. XV, No. 2, December 1956, p. 224.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 221.

by pity and terror, is surely like a medicine to his soul. It clears the mind of its cloud of ignorance, error and prejudice which are the results of the vegetative, sensitive and the affective parts of his soul. It quickens the essential soul life of the audience and brings it to its ideal state of being towards which its nature is to proceed, (as all things tend to realise their appropriate forms), and thus acting as a curative and a tonic. This is tragic catharsis.”¹

No doubt, Dr. Choudhry appears to have grasped the essential truth of the matter and does his best to reconcile the Eastern and Western views on the question of purification by equating “Katharsis” with “Rasa”. But there is quite clearly a confusion in his mind between ‘philosophy’, ‘reason’ and ‘intellect’ on the one hand, and the ‘soul’ on the other. It is doubtful whether reason as we usually know it, “is the noblest portion of man’s soul” and whether through its dynamic operation alone in a tragedy, the essential soul-life of the audience can be quickened. The whole method of approach here to the question or secret of the true aesthetic pleasure which one gets from a tragedy, i.e., an apparent spectacle of pain and suffering and evil is intellectual and psychological, although Dr. Choudhry tries to subtilise it as best as he can, and raise the level of the faculty of reason to something higher and finer than the positive logical reason. Nor is the mind as understood by him here, the usual analytical, scientifically operating critical mind but something akin to the purer, higher mind capable of grasping the subtle essences and pure ideas underlying things and objects. Still it is far from that large and subtle intuitive, psychic and spiritual power of vision and apprehension from which the great poet works and produces a work of eternal beauty and joy, whether it is a comedy or a tragedy, an epic or a lyric. As Sri Aurobindo reminds us, “the poetic delight and beauty are born of a deeper rapture and not of the surface mind’s excited interest and enjoyment, or life and existence”.² And this is as much true of a tragic poem as any other, and this “deeper rapture” is not the gift of reason, howsoever noble and acute.

This is why when Sri Aurobindo refers to the theory of Rasa of Indian aesthetics, in connection with the

1. Ibid., p. 226.

2. *F.P.*, p. 342.

question of poetic beauty and delight, he does not entangle himself in the hair-splitting subtleties of the meaning and nature and place of location like the classical Sanskrit literary critics, but seizes its pristine essential idea, as Abhinavagupta and Visvanātha appear to have done in their most lucid moments of theorising, and concentrates entirely upon the basic spiritual sense which later on gave rise to the intellectual, critical formulation of this theory. So he says, "The ancient Indian critics defined the essence of poetry as *rasa* and by that word they meant a concentrated taste, a spiritual essence of emotion, an essential aesthesis, the soul's pleasure in the pure and perfect sources of feeling. The memory of the soul that takes in, broods over and transmutes the mind's thought, feeling and experience, is a large part of the process which comes by this aesthesis, but it is not quite the whole thing; it is rather only a common way by which we get at something that stands behind, the spiritual being in us which has the secret of the universal delight and the eternal beauty of existence. That which we call genius works or comes out from something deep within which calls down the word, the vision, the light and power from a level above the normal mind and it is the sense of the inrush from above which makes the rapture and the enthusiasm of illumination and inspiration. That source, when we know better the secrets of our being, turns out to be the spiritual self with its diviner consciousness and knowledge, happier fountains of power, inalienable delight of existence."¹ Indeed, it is only when we are able to touch and lay hold on this "source" that we can truly feel the *rasa* which, according to Visvanātha, "is identical with the taste of one's own blissful self", or, as others have put it, is akin to "Atmanand" or "Brahmanand". We, thus, clearly see the difference between Dr. Choudhry's interpretation of the aesthetic pleasure, subtle and astute and synthetic of the East and the West as it is, and Sri Aurobindo's profound and luminous conception of it. As suggested above, Dr. Choudhry's interpretation is basically intellectual and psychological, whereas Sri Aurobindo's is supremely spiritual.

It is, then, "this spiritual Ananda making all existence luminous and wonderful and beautiful to us",² which

1. Ibid., pp. 342-43.

2. Ibid., p. 345.

was to the ancient Indian idea the creative principle of all life and its activity and all art and literature, and it is this deeper rapture of the soul of which we stand in great need today, both in life and literature. A literature which is constantly governed and inspired by such a spiritual principle of creativity can alone exercise an abiding and wholesome influence upon the life of the people. One can legitimately say that "ancient India was created by the Vedas and Upanishads and that the visions of inspired seers made a people".¹ It was the sublime poetry of the Vedas and Upanishads which revealed the gods as well as the subtle face and form of the highest Absolute Reality, the Ineffable Unmanifest to the ancients. That poetry, again, showed them the divine truth and power and joy present in the self of each human being and also subsisting at the heart of each manifested material reality and feeling and idea. It also revealed to them the knowledge, the *yoga* to attain self-realisation and God-realisation and finally the realisation where the self and God are one. By its immense spiritual riches and powers this poetry succeeded in making itself "the fountain-head of all that incessant urge to spirituality", which has been India's distinguishing gift and cultural motive. Later on, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, too, revealed to the Indian people as a whole "in forms of noble beauty and grandiose or beautiful or telling types of character"² the significance of the spiritual, ethical and aesthetic ideas. These sublimely noble creations of the Indian poetic spirit "have played a great and well-recognised formative part second only to religion and the stress of religio-social training in the life of the Indian peoples".³ In the Middle Ages, too, "the religious poetry of the Vaishnavas, Shaivas, Shaktas has entered powerfully into the life of the nation and helped to shape its temperament and soul-type".⁴ When we turn to the West, we find a more or less similar phenomenon of art and literature moulding the very life and thought of the people. "The effect of the Homeric poems in Greece, the intimate connection of poetry and art with the public life of Athens, sprang from a similar but less steep height of poetic and artistic

1. Ibid., p. 345.

2. Ibid., p. 346.

3. Ibid., p. 346.

4. Ibid., p. 346.

motive. The epic poems revealed the Hellenic people to itself in the lucid and clear nobility and beauty of an uplifting of life and an aesthetic sense of the humanity and divinity of man; the later art and poetry interpreted to Athens her religious ideas, her thought, her aesthetic instincts, the soul of grandeur and beauty of her culture."¹

Sri Aurobindo has no doubt whatsoever in his mind that in all these instances, as in others like the art and poetry of Japan and of China, "a more or less profoundly intuitive creation from the depths and expression through poetic delight of the soul of people has been the secret of this effect and this power of creation or influence".² But as we gradually enter the modern times we find an increasing rift or hiatus created between art and literature, on the one hand, and the life and culture of the people, on the other. Consequently, we see that poetry or, for the matter of that, art and literature as a whole has been made "more a servant of aesthetic pleasure than a creative master of life and great spiritual agent". No wonder, if "it has leaned too much on the surface or external interests of life for the pleasure of the intellect and imagination and failed too much to create life from within by a deeper delight in the power of vision of the soul and spirit".³

In the light of these observations, Sri Aurobindo glances at the over-all picture of English poetry thus:

"The high energy of English poetry has done great and interesting things; it has portrayed life with charm and poetic interest in Chaucer, made thought and character and action and passion wonderful to the life soul in us in Shakespeare, seen and spoken with nobility and grandeur of vision and voice in Milton, intellectualised vigorous or pointed commonplace in Pope and Dryden, played with elegance and beauty on the lesser things with the Victorians or cast out here and there a profounder strain of thought or more passionate and aspiring voice, and if the most spiritual strains have been few, yet it has dreamed in light in Shelley or drawn close in Wordsworth to the soul in Nature...."⁴

And it may be safely presumed, says Sri Aurobindo, that "this is....true in spite of exceptions....of almost

1. Ibid., p. 346.

2. Ibid., p. 346.

3. Ibid., p. 347.

4. Ibid., p. 347.

all the later European literature".¹ What is, therefore, lacking in all this fine and vigorous recent Western literature is the desire and ability to "get back to a profounder centre, to create from within in a more universal power of the spirit and its vision and delight of existence".² If this deficiency is made up, as it is hoped it will be, we shall see that the poetry which is born in our midst in the years to come will be "once again young and mighty and creative and its word deeply effective on life by the power of a greater Ananda".³ It is our good fortune that a beginning in this direction has already been made in recent times. Above all, in the presence of the new richer and immenser and mightier strains of Sri Aurobindo's own rapturous cosmic poetry in English we need not now entertain any doubts about the glorious future of English poetry.

Some of the important things which Sri Aurobindo would like the poets of today to remember, therefore, are that "a merely cultured poetry fair in form and word and playing on the surface strings of mind and emotion"⁴ will not serve their purpose or that of the new cosmic age which is ushering in. Now "the human mind is opening to an unprecedented largeness of vision of the greatness of the worlds, the wonder of life, the self of man, the mystery of the spirit in him and the universe".⁵ Therefore, it is in this vision that the future poetry must seek its inspiration, and "the greater its universality of joy in existence, the more it seeks through intuitive sight and aesthesis the deepest fountains of poetic delight and beauty, the more it will become powerfully creative of a greater life for the race".⁶

If the modernist poet today has become a rebel and wants to shatter all the shackles of customary vision and imagination and metrical form and poetic diction, it is not at all too bad. Most probably all this breaking and tearing was necessary. But while he may legitimately "claim all things in heaven or earth or beyond for his portion",⁷ he is in no way to lose or neglect but

1. Ibid., p. 347.

2. Ibid., p. 348.

3. Ibid., p. 348.

4. Ibid., p. 348.

5. Ibid., p. 348.

6. Ibid., p. 348.

7. Ibid., p. 348.

vigilantly preserve "that care for a fine poetic beauty and delight"¹ which his ancestors so conscientiously safeguarded "by excluding all or most that did not readily obey its law or turn to fair material for poetic shaping".² He has to decide for himself whether "beauty is a by-product",³ as Aldous Huxley appears to think, or whether "the contemplation of the horrid or sordid or disgusting, by an artist, is the necessary and negative aspect of the impulse toward the pursuit of beauty".⁴ He has also to examine for himself how far it is true to say with T.S. Eliot that "...the essential advantage for a poet is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal: it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom, the horror and the glory";⁵ or whether he would like to follow the observation of E.W.F. Tomlin when he says, "the sensitive poet turns from ugliness seen in his surroundings. The sensitive and mature poet will look behind this ugliness, and see the beauty of which it is the distortion".⁶

As far as Sri Aurobindo is concerned, he will suggest to him to steep all that he finds in life or sees within himself in "that profoundest vision which delivers out of each thing its spiritual Ananda, the secret of truth and beauty in it for which it was created..."⁷ and will like to remind him that "it is the sense of that spiritual joy of vision, and not in any lower sensuous, intellectual or imaginative seeing, that Keats's phrase becomes true for the poet, beauty that is truth, truth that is beauty, and this is all that we need to know as the law of our aesthetic knowledge".⁸ Also, he would like him to remember that "in all things that speech can express there are two elements, the outward or instrumental and the real or spiritual. In thought, for instance, there is the intellectual idea, that which the intelligence makes precise and definite to us, and the soul idea, that which

1. Ibid., p. 348.

2. Ibid., p. 348.

3. Quoted in *The World of Poetry*, op. cit., p. 65.

4. T. S. Eliot on 'Dante': *The Sacred Wood*, University Paper Back Edition, Methuen & Co., 1960, p. 169.

5. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, op. cit., p. 106.

6. *Lectures on Modern Poetry*, delivered to the Speech Fellowship, 1936, quoted in *The World of Poetry*, op. cit., p. 66.

7. *F.P.*, pp. 348-49.

8. Ibid., p. 349.

exceeds the intellectual and brings us into nearness or identity with the whole reality of the thing expressed. Equally in emotion, it is not the mere emotion itself the poet seeks, but the soul of the emotion, that in it for the delight of which the soul in us and the world desires or accepts emotional experience. So too with the poetical sense of objects, the poet's attempt to embody in his speech truth of life or truth of Nature. It is this greater truth and its delight and beauty for which he is seeking, beauty which is truth and truth beauty and therefore a joy for ever, because it brings us the delight of the soul in the discovery of its own deeper realities".¹

The substance and spirit of the poetry which will emerge from such a profoundly joyous spiritual vision are, therefore, full of the inherent rapture of life itself, and not something away or aloof from it, standing in some transcendental lonely splendour of its own. It is "the beauty and delight of the thousand-coloured, many-crested, million-waved miracle of life made a hundred times more profoundly meaningful by the greatness and the sweetness and attracting poignancy of the self-creating inmost soul"² which will pour into the epics and lyrics and dramas of the future. There is, indeed, in life an "infinite ecstasy which is the source of the universal delight and beauty".³ But above all, "the nearer we get to the absolute Ananda, the greater becomes our joy in man and the universe and the receptive and creative spiritual emotion which needs for its voice the moved tones of poetic speech".⁴

As in the case of Truth and life, so in that of beauty and delight, too, we, therefore, find that Sri Aurobindo brings his large, free and universal, an all-embracing, spiritual vision—or what in one of his letters he calls the "Overmind aesthesis",⁵ a term of his own coinage—to bear upon the question. It is not by an ordinary aesthetic sense but an aesthesis which is universal in scope and spiritual in nature, sense and feeling, an aesthesis, that is, where "we have a first firm foundation of the experience of a universal beauty, a universal love,

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 349.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 350.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 350.

5. See *Letters* 3rd Series, pp. 122-130, for a full explanation of this expression.

a universal delight”,¹ in which “every form becomes beautiful in a deeper and larger sense of beauty than that commonly known to us (and one) sees also the one spirit in all, the face of the Divine everywhere and there can be no greater Ananda than that. . . . (and) feels oneness with all, sympathy, love, the bliss of the Brahman”²—it is by this kind of a truly dynamic spiritual aesthesis that Sri Aurobindo would like the poets to create the new poetry which is in the offing.

(v) THE SPIRIT

The Spirit, according to Sri Aurobindo, is the first and last Reality, the “Reality Omnipresent”. In the language of the ancients “Brahman is the Alpha and the Omega. Brahman is the One besides whom there is nothing else existent”.³ We are born out of the Spirit and it is to the Spirit that we finally go. The idea is as old as the Veda, but it has to be fully experienced and realised again and again by man before it becomes a living reality to him and he can say like the seers of old that we are the children of Immortality. Indeed, a stage comes when he realises not only that he is a child of the Spirit but he is the Spirit; he does not merely become aware of the soul in him but comes to realise that he is the soul, so perfect grows the identity between him and the Spirit, in the ultimate phase of his spiritual growth. As to the nature of this spiritual Reality, Sri Aurobindo’s *magnum opus* in prose, *The Life Divine* is there to give us a full idea.

Now the question which arises here is: Can poetry help us realise this ultimate spiritual Reality? Sri Aurobindo would say: yes, and in a large measure, too. As a matter of fact, the poetry of the future which he visualises is eminently calculated to be a product of this experience of man and it is towards that stage of poetic creation that the poetic activity of man is moving at present. That is why, in his view, the poets of the greatest importance, belonging to recent times, are those who have succeeded best in giving us the first clear and firm, though elementary, notes of this overwhelming spiritual music. The true importance of poets like

1. *F.P.*, p. 125.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

3. *The Life Divine*, American Edition, p. 34.

Whitman, Carpenter, A.E., Yeats and Tagore, for example, lies, therefore, here, according to him, for they are the poetic harbingers of the age of the spirit into which we are entering once again.

And then, has he not always stressed indeed, this is the recurring theme, striking upon our mind like a gong or some majestic burden of a grand choric song, of his philosophic and yogic and historical and sociological vision, his poetry and poetic criticism that it is the spirit which is the chief presiding presence and impelling force behind all that exists and happens here? If poetry is concerned with the expression of truth or life or beauty and delight, its supreme utterance is reached only when it tries to get inspiration and feeling and idea and imagination from the spiritual vision of truth and life and beauty and delight. The supreme poetic truth is, therefore, according to him the spiritual truth, the supreme poetic life is the life of the spirit and the supreme poetic beauty and delight is spiritual beauty and Ananda. Hence the supreme importance of *mantric* poetry to man.

Not only this, he never fails to suggest to us, as often as he can, in course of the examination of the various elements and aspects of poetry that the poetic activity is essentially an activity of the spirit within us. We recall here again his famous observation: "the true creator, the true hearer is the soul". In the very introductory chapter of *The Future Poetry* we find him stating in clear terms that the mark of poetry "is a greater (not exclusive) tendency to the spiritual rather than the merely earthly, to the inward and subjective than the outward and objective, to the life within and behind than the life in front".¹ And towards the close of the book we have the same truth, impressed upon us, though in a more opulent and majestic language. As already quoted, he says :

"The voice of poetry comes from a region above us, a plane of our being above and beyond our personal intelligence, a supermind which sees things in their innermost and largest truth by a spiritual identity and with a lustrous effulgency and rapture and its native language is a revelatory, inspired, intuitive word limpid or subtly vibrant or densely packed with the glory of this ecstasy and lustre."²

In between the opening and the close of the book we

1. *F.P.*, p. 5.

2. *F.P.*, pp. 392-93.

have numerous references to this basic fact of his poetics—the fact that “it is always indeed the spirit in him (i.e. man) that shapes his poetic utterance”. For Sri Aurobindo, therefore, there can be no real or true poetry unless it has at its very source of inspiration or vision the touch of the spirit in some form and measure or other. We have already seen that according to him, “the poet’s business most really, most intimately is not with the outward physical life as it is or the life of the passions and emotions only for its own sake or even with some ideal life imaged by the mind or some combining and new shaping of these things into a form of beauty, but with the life of the soul and with these other things only as its expressive forms.”¹ Not only is the poetic vision of life itself is “but a soul-view”,² but the very idea of metre in poetry is a spiritual fact “there is perhaps a truth in the Vedic idea that the spirit of creation framed all the movements of the world by *Chandas*, in certain fixed rhythms of the formative word.”³ The same thing is true of the poetic rhythm —“...the conductor of the orchestral movement is the soul coming forward to get its own work done by its higher and unanalyzable methods.”⁴ The poetic act, the poetic vision, the poetic metre and rhythm, the poetic word and substance are, thus, all matters and modes of the spirit.

Poetry can, therefore, take a legitimate share in opening wide the doors of the kingdom of the Spirit for us, provided, of course, it is written from a true spiritual consciousness. This is, for example, the justification which he, in his characteristic modest manner, puts forward for the survival of his own epic, *Savitri*, the outstanding example of sustained spiritual poetry written from an entirely spiritual consciousness in the English language: “There may still be a place for a poetry which seeks to enlarge the field of poetic creation and find for the inner spiritual life of man and his now occult or mystical knowledge and experience of the whole hidden range of his and the world’s being, not a corner and limited expression such as it had in the past, but a wide space and as manifold and integral an expression of the boundless and innumerable riches that lie hidden

1. Ibid., pp. 315-16.

2. Ibid., p. 46.

3. Ibid., pp. 25-26.

4. Ibid., p. 29.

and unexplored as it kept apart under the direct gaze of the Infinite, as has been found in the past for man's surface and finite view and experience of himself and the material world in which he has lived striving to know himself and it as best as he can with a limited mind and senses. The door that has been shut to all but a few may open; the kingdom of the spirit may be established not only in a man's inner being but in his life and his works. Poetry also may have its share in that revolution and become part of the spiritual empire."¹

What, then, is likely to be the general nature of this poetry which, instead of drawing upon the materials of which it has been hitherto composed, is "born direct from and full of the power of the spirit"?² Sri Aurobindo's answer is that "this poetry will be a voice of eternal things raising to a new significance and to a great satisfied joy in experience the events and emotions and transiencies of life...."³ That is to say, contrary to our superficial supposition, this poetry of the Spirit will not really turn its back upon life and its events as we know them in order to keep its gaze constantly fixed upon the eternal Truth or upon some transcendental Reality only which exists far away and apart from us and our life. Even if the world and all that it contains are taken to be an illusion or maya, as there have been people who hold such a belief, the poetry of the Spirit, as Sri Aurobindo understands it, will not be quite indifferent to them. On the contrary, "the events and emotions and transiencies of life" will be there, as in the usual poetry, but they will be raised to a new significance, inasmuch as the poet concerned will treat them as "the steps of an eternal manifestation."⁴ It is with a new insight into them and the touch of a new vision drawn from the experience of the Eternal that the spiritual poet will deal with the so-called lower things and events of life. The stress will not be upon the external realities but the eternal truth existing at the core of them and behind them. That is why, Sri Aurobindo proceeds on to say that this poetry "will be an expression of the very self of man and the self of things and the self of Nature."⁵

1. *L.* 3, p. 275.

2. *F.P.*, p. 351.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 351.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 351.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 351.

And as, at a still more developed stage of spiritual experience, one comes to discover that the true self of oneself is fully identical with the self of all, the universal self, this poetry will be no less than "a creative and interpretative revelation of the infinite truth of existence and of the universal delight and beauty and of a greater spiritualised vision and power of life."¹ That is to say, the poetry of the spirit will be an all-embracing creation, revealing to us the individual self, the universal self and also the one eternal self whose graded manifestation the individual and universal selves are. It will speak to us "of new things and of old things in a new way and with a new voice, not by any exclusion or diminution of its province, but by a great heightening above, a great intimacy within, a great enlargement and wideness around, a vision of inmost things and therefore a changed vision of the world and life and the untold potentialities of the soul's experience."²

But this should not make us think that this poetry will be chiefly what we ordinarily call religious poetry. And even if we choose to call it religious because it speaks of the soul and the divinity, it is wrong to think that it will be religious in the conventional, traditional sense. It will not be concerned at all with any particular religion, nor will it draw upon any religious creed or dogma or even the language and symbolism of any sectarian religious belief. Sri Aurobindo, therefore, makes it quite clear to us that while "it will restore to us the sense of the Eternal, the presence of the Divine which has been taken from us for a time by an intellect too narrowly and curiously fixed on the external and physical world",³ it will not try to effectuate this restoration "in the feeble and conventional tones of traditional religion."⁴ On the contrary, it will be in the truest sense of the term a spiritual recovery and restoration, for it will come to us "as a voice of intuitive experience and the rhythm and chant of the revelation of an eternal presence"⁵ but not along the lines of any particular religious belief or thought or expression. It will be the voice of the eternal and universal spirit in us transcending all racial, communal

1. Ibid., p. 351.

2. Ibid., pp. 354-55.

3. Ibid., p. 355.

4. Ibid., p. 355.

5. Ibid., p. 355.

and religious barriers of belief and outlook. The Divine or God will be certainly there at the very centre of all experience and expression but not the Divine or God of any particular religious denomination or sect. It will be a limitless and all-embracing God or Divinity striking a responsive chord in the heartbeat, or better still, soul-vibration of each one of us. Such a poetic voice "will reveal to us by the inspired rhythmic word the God who is the self of all things and beings, the life of the universe, the Divinity in man, and . . . will express all the emotion and delight of the endeavour of the human soul to discover the touch and joy of that Divinity within him in whom he feels the mighty counts of his own being and life and effort and his fullness and unity with all cosmic experience and with Nature and with all creatures."¹ It is quite evident that unless we think of religion in a completely universalised and spiritualised sense, there is hardly any religion which is able to cover such a wide gamut of the freedom of the human spirit.

Also, this poetry of the Spirit is not to be confused with mystic poetry of the traditional, conventional nature, for though inspired by the vision and realisation of the Eternal, the Absolute, the One, the Beloved Person etc., it will not be concerned only with "the more exceptional inner states and touches"² or rare visions and experiences of the ineffable, supernatural Divine Mystery or Glory, which usually constitute "the domain of mystic poetry",³ but with "everything in our inner and outer existence until all life and experience has been brought within the mould of the spiritual sense and the spiritual interpretation."⁴ This poetry will seek to show us—with the spiritual clarity comparable to sunlight as contrasted with the moonlight veil of mystic poetry⁵ - the Divine mystery and glory everywhere, the face of the Beloved Person shining on all faces, the one and the Absolute hidden in all, informing and sustaining all. And thus "a poetry of this kind will be in a supreme way what all art should be, a thing of harmony and joy and illumination, a solution and release of the soul from

1. Ibid., p. 355.

2. Ibid., p. 355.

3. Ibid., p. 355.

4. Ibid., p. 355.

5. *L.* 3, p. 76.

its vital unrest and questioning and struggle, not by any ignoring of these things but by an uplifting into the strength of the self within and the light and air of its greater view where there is found not only the point of escape but the supporting calmness and power of a seated knowledge, mastery and deliverance."¹ Indeed, if we understand aright the true spirit and meaning of what the ancient Sanskrit aestheticians called the *SHANTA RASA*, there should be in the greatest art and poetry, or for the matter of that, in all art and poetry worth the name, "something of the calm of the impersonal basing and elevating the effort and struggle of the personality, something of the largeness of the universal releasing and harmonising the troubled concentrations of the individual existence, something of the sense of the transcendent raising the inferior, ignorant and uncertain powers of life towards a greater strength and light and Ananda".² That is, at any rate, the way in which the poetry of the Spirit will be invariably a producer of the soul of all *Rasas* viz. the *Shanta Rasa*, and serve as one of the surest "fortifiers and builders of the soul of man and assure it in the grandeur of its own largest self and spirit".³

It is here particularly that we may notice, by the way, a marked difference between the poetry of the East and the poetry of the West. According to Sri Aurobindo, "The poetry of Europe has been a voice intensely eager and moved but restless, troubled and without a sure base of happiness and repose, vibrating with the passion of life and avid of its joy and pleasure and beauty, but afflicted also by its unrest, grief, tragedy, discord, insufficiency, incertitude, capable only of its lesser harmonies, not of any great release and satisfaction."⁴ On the other hand, "the art and poetry of the East have been the creation of a larger and quieter spirit, intensely responsive as in the far East to deeper psychic significances and finding there fine and subtle harmonies of the soul's experience or, as in India, expressing in spite of the ascetic creed of vanity and illusion much rather the greatness and power and satisfied activity of human thought and life and action and behind it the communion

1. *F.P.*, pp. 355-56.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 356.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 356.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 356.

of the soul with the Eternal.”¹

The poetry of the Spirit will, therefore, seek to achieve a synthesis of these two broad poetic movements or voices of humanity on some higher and subtler spiritual plane of aesthesis so that the unrest and discords and tragedies and incertitudes of the individual or collective human being struggling in the world of ignorance below are ultimately resolved and dissolved into “a more potent and all-comprehending release into the calm and delight of the spirit.”²

The poetry which is full of the power of the Spirit will also release into expression, according to Sri Aurobindo, “a new depth of the intimacies of the soul with Nature.”³ “The early poetry of Nature”, he says, “gave us merely the delight of the forms of objects and the beauty of the setting of the natural world around man’s life, but not any inner communion between him and the universal Mother.”⁴ Later on, the poetry of Nature advanced one step further and showed us “more of the subtleties of the vital soul of the natural world”⁵ which were, at the same time, in tune with the “sensation’ and emotion of the life-spirit in us.”⁶ And out of this affinity between the vital soul of Nature and the vital soul of man there “arose an intellectual and aesthetic sense of hidden finer and subtler things and, more profound, in the poetry of Wordsworth, Byron, Keats and Shelley an attempt at communion with universal presence in Nature and a living principle of peace or light and love or universal power or conscious delight and beauty.”⁷ Now in the future when poetry comes to be written more and more with the conscious power of the Spirit in its veins and blood, we shall have, says he, “a more deeply seeing and intimate poetry (which) will take up these things into a yet greater Nature sense and vision and make us aware of the very self and soul and conscious being of Nature, her profoundest psychic suggestion and significance....”⁸ At present, we are

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 356-57.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 357.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 357.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 357.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 357.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 357.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 357.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 357.

limited in our vital, emotional and intellectual sympathies. But with the growth of the consciousness and power of the spirit in us we shall feel "the touch of the one self in all being"¹ and thus delivered from our present limitation of sympathy by this spiritual touch, we shall come to feel through this new spiritualised poetry of Nature "a unity with other consciousness in Nature and hear the voice of self-revelation of all that is mute to us, the soul and life of things that now seem inert and lifeless, the soul and life of the animal world, the soul and life of the things that grow in silence and are enclosed in the absorbed dream of their own half-conscious existence."² And gradually we shall come to see that this poetry of the spirit is not confined to the deeper and more conscious interpretation of man and terrestrial Nature only but is also able to provide us with "the key of the worlds of supernature"³ and thereby "allow us to move among the beings and scenes, images and influences and presences of the psychic kingdoms which are near to us behind their dark or luminous curtain and . . . enter into vaster realms of the self and other universal states and the powers that stand behind our life and the soul's eternal spaces".⁴ And what is more, it will do this not so much through the symbols of the gods and goddesses or mighty titans or greatened human heroic figures, as the old poets represented, "in hues of romantic glamour or in the far-off light of a mystic remoteness"⁵ but "with the close directness and reality that comes from intimate vision and feeling",⁶ and thus make these things abundantly and warmly "a part of our living experience".⁷

Then, again, Sri Aurobindo suggests to us that "a poetry of large spiritual inspiration"⁸ will bring about an appreciable change in our very historical sense. At present we find that we are apt to glamourise the past and belittle the present and even think cynically and disparagingly of the future, presuming that history repeats

1. Ibid., p. 358.

2. Ibid., p. 358.

3. Ibid., p. 358.

4. Ibid., p. 358.

5. Ibid., p. 358.

6. Ibid., p. 358.

7. Ibid., p. 358.

8. Ibid., p. 358.

itself and man hardly learns and grows better by his past or present mistakes and experiences. This is chiefly because we have not yet learnt as a race or community to live in and act from a higher and deeper consciousness of the spirit. But once we begin to live in the spirit, we are bound to be "able to distinguish the eternal in the transient forms of the moment and to see too in these forms a revelation of the spirit's greater significances".¹ That is to say, we shall learn to live more and more in what is eternally present and, at the same time, in what goads us on to reach the greater heights and glories of the future, instead of being kept rigidly tied to the past either emotionally or imaginatively or intellectually, romantically or realistically. Therefore, a poetry which comes to be written with this enlarged and freed spiritual vision and consciousness "must necessarily be...largely present and futurist in its insistence".² And even if its author feels the urge to recall and deal with the past, he will "transfigure" it for us but "in a new way and with a new eye"³ in order to derive some eternal potent significance from it in the present way of living and may be, for the purpose of casting in its light and with its help the moulds of the future, "but will not feel that need to live in an imaginative preoccupation with the past which withdraws compelled from the unmanageable and transformable actuality of the present ..."⁴ Most of all, "his vision will search all the ways of the present and interpret deeply to man the sense of that which is making him and which he is making".⁵ And it will do so with so much of courageous optimism and faith that man will be able to see "the divinity in all its disguises"⁶ even in all "that is ugly and terrible and baffling in the enigma of our actual human life".⁷ It is, thus, that his poetry will be able to discover and grasp the "deeper aesthesis"⁸ of the divine reality and "disengage what is struggling untransformed in its outsides and make out of it by poetic sympathy

1. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

material of spiritual truth and beauty"¹ of an abiding value and significance.

As a result of this courageous optimistic discovery of "the divinity in all its disguises", he will come to develop a new moral outlook too. Acquiring "a clearer and more inspiring vision of the destiny of the spirit of man"² he will not feel morally depressed by what man has made of himself and his life today. On the contrary, he will see "the divinity in man"³ even as he is, the Divinity not only "in his struggle and victory and failure" but also "in his sin and offence and littleness".⁴ But above all, he will acquire a large grand moral vision of the future destiny of man. Undaunted by the so-called discouraging and vile and ugly spectacle of the human lot today he will reach a new potent poise of faith, seeing that it is the spirit of man and not his outward limited helpless nature which is the "master of the future".⁵ What is more, he will also learn to see that it is in a profound sense "the call and attraction"⁶ of this almighty future that "makes the past and present".⁷ And as this "future will be more and more seen to be the growth of the godhead in the human being which is the high fate of this race that thinks and wills and labours towards its own perfection",⁸ he will see its past and present in their truer perspective in the light of the future than he is able to do at the present moment. And it is in radiantly hopeful terms that Sri Aurobindo draws the picture of the glorious future of man which such a poetry of the spirit will inspire him with :

"This is a strain that we shall hear more and more, the song of the growing godhead of the kind, of human unity, of spiritual freedom, of the coming supermanhood of man, of the divine ideal seeing to actualise itself in the life of the earth, of the call to the individual to rise to his godlike possibility and to the race to live in the greatness of that which humanity feels within itself as a power of the spirit which it has to deliver into some yet ungrasped perfect

1. Ibid., p. 359.

2. Ibid., p. 359.

3. Ibid., p. 359.

4. Ibid., p. 359.

5. Ibid., p. 359.

6. Ibid., p. 360.

7. Ibid., p. 360.

8. Ibid., p. 360.

form of clearness.”¹

And in this way the poet, endowed with the vision of the power of the spirit, will come to occupy the very highest place among poets and men, for, as Sri Aurobindo puts it, “to embellish life with beauty is only the most outward function of art and poetry, to make life more intimately beautiful and noble and great and full of meaning is its higher office, but its highest comes when the poet becomes the seer and reveals to man his eternal self and the god-heads of its manifestation”.² Historically speaking, Sri Aurobindo would like to evaluate his position thus :

“...when the spirit in man is preoccupied with the outward life, the great poets are those who make his common life and action and its surroundings splendid and beautiful and noble to him by the power of their vision: when it is the intellect through which it labours, the great poets are those who give a profound enlightening idea and creative interpretation of the world and Nature and all that man is and does and thinks and dreams, but when the spirit turns to its own large intuitive will and vision, then it is yet profounder things to which the great poet must give utterance, the inmost sense of things, the inmost consciousness of Nature, the movement of the deepest soul of man, the truth that reveals the meaning of existence and the universal delight and beauty and the power of a greater life and the infinite potentialities of our experience and self-creation.”³

Through his own poetry, notably *Savitri*, he has actually demonstrated how this is really so and how such a poetry can be written even on a grand epic scale with “a more intense and revealing speech, a more inward and subtle and penetrating rhythm, a greater stress of sight, a more vibrant and responsive sense, the eye that looks at all smallest and greatest things for the significances that have not yet been discovered and the secrets that are not on the surface”.⁴

And as far as the reader of such a poetry of the spirit is concerned, he can gain through its reading not only ample imaginative and spiritual delight and wisdom of an extraordinary kind but also what is known as spiritual realisation or realisation of the Divine. We have the

1. Ibid., p. 360.

2. Ibid., p. 360.

3. Ibid., pp. 360-61.

4. Ibid., p. 361.

examples of our great scriptures like the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita which have still "a power to awaken a spiritual and uplifting impulse, even certain kinds of realisation".¹ Referring to the Vedic poets, Sri Aurobindo says that they "regarded their poetry as *mantras* (which) were the vehicles of their own realisations" and therefore they could equally well "become vehicles of realisation for others... be steps on the way or at least lights on the way", for "anything that carries the Word, the Light in it, spoken or written, can light this fire within, open a sky, as it were, bring the effective vision of which the Word is the body".² Thus without doubt such a poetry may be said to possess also a direct, dynamic and abiding practical "spiritual or psychic value and effectiveness"³ such as other kinds of poetry may not and usually do not possess.

But then for this thing to happen the reader concerned must be willing and prepared to develop "a new mentality",⁴ a mentality which, exceeding far the developed human intellect of which we feel so proud today, "must open now to an understanding and seeing spirituality",⁵ "a certain kind of inner seeing and feeling of things... which to the intellect would seem occult and visionary".⁶ Indeed, as Sri Aurobindo says in some detail in one of his letters, "this is the stumbling-block of mystic poetry and specially mystic poetry of this kind. The mystic feels real and present, even ever-present to his experience, intimate to his being, truths which to the ordinary reader are intellectual abstractions or metaphysical speculations. He is writing of experiences that are foreign to the ordinary mentality. Either they are unintelligible to it and in meeting them it flounders about as in an obscure abyss or it takes them as poet's fancies expressed in intellectually devised images. He uses words and images in order to convey to the mind some perception, some figure of that which is beyond thought to the mystic there is no such thing as abstraction. Everything which to the intellectual mind is abstract has a concreteness, substantiality which is more real than the sensible form

1. *L3.*, p. 292.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 292.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 293.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 352.
6. *L3.*, p. 73.

of an object or of a physical event. To him, consciousness is the very stuff of existence and he can feel it everywhere enveloping and penetrating the stone as much as man or the animal. A movement, a flow of consciousness is not to him an image but a fact. What is to be done under these circumstances? The mystical poet can only describe what he has felt, seen in himself or others or in the world just as he has felt or seen it or experienced through exact vision, close contact or identity and leave it to the general reader to understand or not understand or misunderstand according to his capacity".¹ Hence the need for developing an entirely new, almost a large intuitive psychic mentality or consciousness, or at least the faculty of some inner seeing and feeling of things on the part of the reader. Not only this. Sri Aurobindo is obliged to say about both the emergence and appreciation of such a poetry of the spirit that "this can only come if the mind of the race takes actually the step over which it is now hesitating and passes from the satisfaction of the liberated intellect which has been its preoccupation for the last two centuries to the pursuit of the realisation of the larger self, from the scrutiny of the things that explain to the experience of the things that reveal, the truths of the spirit".² Indeed, nothing short of "the raising of the intellectual mind to the intuitive supra-intellectual spiritual consciousness"³ can be of effective help in this great poetic adventure which will ultimately bring with it not merely the knowledge of one's "pure, inmost, highest and largest self and spirit"⁴ but also the "consciousness... of the oneness of the individual and the race and a harmonious unity of the life of man with the spirit in Nature and the spirit of the universe".⁵ The removal of the stumbling-blocks on the way of such a high adventure is, therefore, to say the least, worth all the trouble.

* * *

We have, thus, examined in some detail Sri Aurobindo's luminous views on truth, beauty, delight, life and the spirit, which, according to him, are some of the eternal powers that harmonise to preside over every high poetic creation. The poet may not be always conscious of their

1. *L.* 3, pp. 39-40.

2. *F.P.*, p. 351.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 354.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 354.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 354.

presence, or at any rate, the presence of all of them. He may not even feel them to be living powers guiding him at every stage of his creation. On the surface, he may simply think that he is concerned with embodying a particular experience through a particular structure of words, and he need not bother whether the experience is based upon what is meant by life and truth or whether it is the outcome of what is known as delight or his inmost spirit, nor may he worry to see whether the poem, as it grows on his hands, is a beautiful structure of words meant to fill him and the reader with some kind of spiritual joy. What chiefly matters is the experience and how best he can render it into a poetic form which is good enough for his purpose. It may be so, and yet this does not give us a complete, or even a true, picture of the poetic activity and the various factors which go into its making. To talk of poetry in such a carefree, light-hearted manner is, to say the least, to talk of it superficially and irresponsibly. But whether one thinks or talks about it superficially or seriously, one cannot escape from the basic truth that it is in some harmonious conjunction of these or most of these ideal forces that the birth of poetry really takes place, and that its quality as a work of art will mostly depend upon the manner and level of such a harmonisation.

At any rate, the idea of great poetry which Sri Aurobindo envisages in his literary criticism and has actually sought to materialise in his own poetry is difficult to realise unless we understand the full implications and powers and possibilities of the luminous quincunx of truth, beauty, delight, life and the soul in the way he has done. If the idea is to make poetry, apparently written even about the ordinary things and experiences of life, in the ordinary familiar language, approximate, as closely and faithfully as possible, to the power and form of the *mantra*, the observations of Sri Aurobindo deserve a very careful reading. If the "great formative and illuminative power" of the spiritual delight which really constitutes the controlling as well as shaping nucleus of every genuine poetic creation is to have its full play and attain the maximum height of self-expression through the poetic medium, the luminous confederation of these five eternal suns of poetry will appear to be the essential practical and dynamic ideal to be followed by the aspiring artist.

Indeed, these five eternal powers, as explored and expressed by Sri Aurobindo in *The Future Poetry*, constitute the ideal plane, the archetype, as it were, from

which all poetic or artistic creation really emanates. And in proportion as the poet's work comes close to this ideal, the quality and value of his creation will be necessarily determined. But this much is certain that "there can be no artistic activity that has not felt, however imperfectly, the impulsion of these godheads".¹

It is interesting to read about the five corollaries or "satellites", as he calls them, which Prof. Gokak deduces from the Aurobindonian quincunx. He says, "The object in its *Chit* aspect is really a finite expression of the Infinite. It is an expression of the Spirit in terms of matter, life or consciousness or all together. In its *Karanmaya* or archetypal aspect, it is experienced as an imperishable portion of Reality, having its own individuality. It is perceived as an embodiment of Truth. In its *Sukshma* or subtle aspect, it has a life-soul of its own or is inextricably bound up with the vital memories and vibrations of the artist. It has the vitality of life either directly or through the artist. It also presents itself as a portion of Loveliness which it makes more lovely in the moment of contemplation. It has, within it, the capacity to give delight, to arouse emotion, for a thing of beauty is a joy for ever. In its *Sthula* or gross aspect, it makes a twofold appeal. There is the actuality of existence, its defined position in the universe, life as existence perceived by our sense of fact. The object has also its properties and peculiarities which are intellectually apprehended and yield Truth in its lower aspects".²

This is really an admirable deduction from Sri Aurobindo's supreme vision of the poetic creation and gives us a fine account in the Indian philosophical terminology of the various levels or grades of formation of the ultimate or Infinite Truth lying coiled in every artistic work. Indeed, the learned Professor has also attempted at an interpretation of this central truth in terms of both the traditional Sanskrit and Western poetics. But it is rather difficult to accept the interpretation in its entirety, nor can it be said that it is the natural outcome of the ideal archetypal poetic pattern as formulated by Sri Aurobindo. But the observation and deduction are certainly fine and felicitous, and a confirmation of the basic fact that, from whatever point of view we look at an artistic creation, it is some aspect or the other of these five eternal powers

1. V. K. Gokak, op. cit., *Mother India*, October 1953, p. 8.

2. Ibid., pp. 8-9.

which, according to Sri Aurobindo, will be found to act as the presiding deities in this divine shrine of man's creation.

Following the line of Sanskrit poetics, Prof. Gokak says, “*Dhwani*, *Rasa*, *Bhava*, *Alankara*, *Auchitya*—these are the five constituents of a work of art. *Dhwani* has been described as the soul of poetry or art. But of *Dhwani* or suggestion itself, the spirit is the soul. *Rasa*, the aesthetic flavour or essence of a work of art is the expression of an abiding attitude of human personality grounded in a system of sentiments. It embodies the idealisation or universalisation of a fleeting or particular object i.e., its apprehension in its archetypal aspect. The representation or ‘imitation’ of life in the lower sense is only a secondary function of *Rasa*, proceeding from the artist's sense of fact. *Bhava* is a progressively full and complete expression of the emotions aroused in the artist as consequents of his attitude. *Alankara* is form, whether it be viewed as *ukti* or utterance, *riti* or manner, *guna* or artistic peculiarity, and *alankaras* or figures of thought and of speech. The artist's imagination, reason and memory fashion it. *Auchitya* or propriety proceeds...from the artist's Good sense or Discrimination. It is Persuasion in the highest sense”.¹

And just as the principal constituents of a work of art are five in number according to the Indian poetics, there are also, interestingly enough, five distinct parts of the artist's activity on the dynamic side, says Prof. Gokak, from the Western point of view. These are inspiration, imitation, expression, communication and persuasion. “Art”, says he, “is born as inspiration in a lightning flash of intuitive perception, in a state of identity with the object. It develops as Imitation when the Seed-Idea has gained in pulp and broken the turf as a sapling, fed by the artist's perception of the essence of the object. It puts forth its foliage and flowers as Expression...what follows is related to the artist considered as craftsman. A born worshipper of beauty with an instinctive desire to communicate his vision, he turns his medium into a thing of beauty,—a fit receptacle for his vision. His imagination and memory are the inner tools which he employs for the purpose. Imagination detects the similarity in dissimilar things and memory brings to him the throng of impressions and images in which to detect it. His

sensibility gives colour and intensity to the design. His sense of fact helps him to develop Imitation in its secondary aspect whenever necessary, as when some of the actual details of the object are also 'imitated' in a novel, drama or picture. Art is fully itself when it has reached the stage of Persuasion, when the artist, using his discrimination or good sense has given his vision a fitting intellectual body 'Truth in its lower aspect again and endowed his work with balance and proportion, with propriety. Passing through this last phase, art sheds its angularities and excrescences and stands forth, a fitting and radiant embodiment of the Seed-idea. It bears fruit and is ready to take its place in the Mart of 'Time''.¹

It is, no doubt, a very lively logical picture of the poetic process, by Western standards. But it appears that Prof. Gokak has been carried away by his own intellectual vision of the five distinct stages of the creative process, shown as being followed by the artist, as if, step by step, which may not be always true. Nor is it quite clear how "art is fully itself when it has reached the stage of Persuasion". Taken as a general statement, out of the context where it occurs, it may mean that the artist has not really succeeded in his work unless he has immediately succeeded in persuading the recipient about its genuineness or validity. But this may not happen always or, at any rate, as soon as the work of art is completed, particularly when it is something unconventional, new or revolutionary. As experience shows, there is usually a time-lag between the creation of a genuinely new or great work of art and its appreciation or popular reception. And then, again, must the artist concerned give his vision "a fitting intellectual body" in order to acquire the quality or power of persuasiveness? Is it, then, in some fitting intellectual meaning only that the ultimate validity of art lies? Indeed, one cannot help asking questions like these on reading this passage. Nor is the organic, almost inevitable relationship between the stages of inspiration, imitation and expression made fully clear here. Above all, it is doubtful whether a corollary of this kind can be logically drawn from Sri Aurobindo's "luminous quincunx" and described as "the satellites of the suns". In any case, Sri Aurobindo's theoretical description of the dynamic side of the poetic creation or his own experience as a creative poet hardly justifies such a conclusion.

1. Ibid., p. 9.

Nevertheless, Prof. Gokak deserves all credit for the fine, felicitous perception of the relationship or connection, first of all, between this familiar or traditional theoretical position, both in the East and in the West, on the one hand, and Sri Aurobindo's wide-eyed perception and subtle luminous vision, on the other, of the supreme harmony of the five eternal powers of truth, beauty, delight, life and the spirit behind every great work of art. And as in the case of the *mantra*, we may say here, too, that Sri Aurobindo redefines and reinterprets for us, in modern language, the old Indian aesthetic ideal of *Satyam, Shivam* and *Sundaram* (Truth, Beauty, Delight and Good) and thereby shows how that ancient great ideal is something eternal and eternally inspiring to the genuine artist. Written in accordance with this fresh vision of the old ideal, the poetry of today and tomorrow need not be a break with the past, except in its outer moulds of expression; on the contrary, it should be but a full-fledged and felicitous continuation as well as culmination of the familiar, traditional ideal.

■ ■ ■

Chapter 7

THE PLANES OF POETIC INSPIRATION

Let us now turn from the five-fold ideal archetypal powers of poetry to some of the distinctive planes and sources of inspiration which is said to be the immediate dynamics of true poetic creation. There is, first of all, Sri Aurobindo's own example which may help us a little better to understand his theoretical position in this regard. As in the case of quite a number of artists and poets, inspiration plays a large, one may almost say, supreme part in his poetic composition. It is all a matter of his receiving everything, even the work and process of correction and revision, from 'above', as an act of Divine grace, as it were. That inspiration is not something of a blind religious or primitive pagan superstition is clearly proved by even such an atheist as Paul Valéry who stated: "Le premier vers est un don du ciel", and thus admitted that sometimes God gave him a line of poetry to start off with. As John Press comments upon this phenomenon of Valéry's poetic composition, "we need not pause to enquire exactly what Valéry meant when he attributed his inspiration to God: it is enough for us to note that he acknowledged the existence of an external source of power and illumination from which he received a gift that he had not deliberately sought".¹

A mystic, a *yogi*, a God-lover, a 'born' poet as Sri Aurobindo was, it is not surprising at all if he put all along an implicit and complete faith in the power of inspiration and in all his writings entrusted himself entirely to its direction and never even betrayed the desire to question or doubt its working. "There is no invariable 'how' in inspiration —", he says in one of his letters dated 1934, "except that I receive from above my head and receive changes and corrections from above without any initiation by myself or labour of the brain. Even if I change a hundred times, the mind does not work at that, it only receives. Formerly it used not to be so, the mind was always labouring at the stuff of an unshaped formation. My poems come as a stream, beginning at the first line and ending at the

1. *The Fire and the Fountain*, Oxford University Press, 1955, pp. 3-4.

last".¹

The letter, though brief, is an interesting revelation of Sri Aurobindo's experience of inspiration. We note, first of all, that his inspiration comes to him from above his head and not from any other source, certainly not from the domain of the unconscious, individual and collective; even the changes and corrections in his composition are received from above without any initiation by him. Secondly, there appears to have taken place a marked change in the mode of his reception of inspiration in course of time. At first, it appears, the inspiration came to him in the form of "the stuff of an unshaped formation" and his mind was always labouring at it, but this did not work well and he did not get the best results. Later on, he made himself completely receptive and silenced his labouring mind too and entrusted even this instrument entirely into the hands of the inspirational power. And the results, he perceived, were miraculous. The poem began to come to him entire and whole, like Minerva, as it were, fully armed; and they poured upon him "as a stream, beginning at the first line and ending at the last". It was at this stage probably that he came to see that even if he changed a hundred times, the mind did not work at that, and whatever changes and corrections were made, these were not the results of the conscious "labour of the brain" but were things which he received again and again from above his head. That is to say, at all the stages and moments of composition, it was the power of inspiration alone that took the initiative and shaped his creation, and he had only to make his whole being, including the labouring brain, completely receptive to it. But we shall be wrong to think that he became merely passive and inert, something like a merely mechanical recording instrument. No, it was a case of the fullest possible act of collaboration between, one may say, the human and the divine powers or souls, otherwise the idea or necessity of change or revision would not have arisen there at all. It was something profoundly and subtly dynamic, and not just a static automatic affair.

This is why in his case too, as in that of so many others, even the dynamic presence of inspiration did not mean that he had not to work at his poetry or blot out any line, if such a need arose. On the contrary, he

1. *Letters on "Savitri"*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1951, p. 2.

laboured at his poetical *magnum opus*, *Savitri*, for example, for practically the whole of his life, and revised and recast the poem several times. But, as stated above, even for all these changes and revisions he did not depend upon the "labour of the brain", or allow any intellectual or emotional or imaginative 'initiation' of his own to go ahead with the task. Nor did he have any time or habit fixed for this purpose. As he wrote in another letter about the said epic, "No, I do not work at the poem once a week; I have other things to do. Once a month, perhaps I look at the new form of the first Book and make such changes as inspiration points out to me—so that nothing shall fall below the minimum height which I have fixed for it".¹ Indeed, as he admitted in the letter quoted before, he had "made some eight or ten recasts of it originally under the old insufficient inspiration" and afterwards he was "altogether rewriting it, concentrating on the first Book and working on it over and over again with the hope that every line may be of a perfect perfection".² That is to say, the desire not to allow the poem to "fall below the minimum height" he had fixed for it or to make every line of it "a perfect perfection" was always a conscious and dynamic desire, and the dynamic power of inspiration descending from above his head came down only to co-operate with that conscious desire. Phrases like "make such changes as inspiration points out to me", "altogether rewriting it, concentrating... and working on it over and over again" clearly point to some active collaborative work going on within with an avowed purpose in view rather than a blind mechanical automatic writing in a state of hypnotism or inert passivity.

The following passage from this poem itself may give us the very thrill and feeling of the whole experience in a living manner. Indeed, this is a thing which poetry alone can truly render and all prose formulations of the experience look pale before it.

Oft inspiration with her lightning feet,
A sudden messenger from the all seeing tops,
Traversed the soundless corridors of his mind
Bringing her rhythmic sense of hidden things.
A music spoke transcending mortal speech
As if a golden phial of the All-Bliss,
A joy of light, a joy of sudden sight,

1. Ibid., p. 1.

2. Ibid., p. 2.

A rapture of the thrilled undying Word
 Poured into his heart as into an empty cup,
 A repetition of God's first delight
 Creating in a young and virgin Time.
 In a brief moment caught, a little space,
 All-knowledge packed into great wordless thoughts
 Lodged in the expectant stillness of his depths
 A crystal of the ultimate Absolute,
 A portion of the inexpressible Truth
 Revealed by silence to the silent soul.
 The intense creatrix in his stillness wrought;
 Her power fallen speechless grew more intimate;
 She looked upon the seen and the unforeseen,
 Unguessed domains she made her native field.
 All-vision gathered into a single ray,
 As when the eyes stare at an invisible point
 'Till through the intensity of one luminous spot
 An apocalypse of a world of images
 Enters into the kingdom of the seer.

....

A traveller between summit and abyss
 She joined the distant ends, the viewless deeps,
 Or streaked along the roads of Heaven and Hell
 Pursuing all knowledge like a questing hound.
 A reporter and scribe of hidden wisdom talk,
 Her shining minutes of celestial speech,
 Passed through the marked office of the occult mind,
 Transmitting gave to prophet and to seer.
 The inspired body of the mystic Truth.¹

It is not necessary for us here to examine the passage too closely and intellectually in order to bring out all the implications of the nature and function, form and stature of the goddess of inspiration and her mode of operation upon the receptive human spirit. Nor is it necessary for us to bear this in mind that Sri Aurobindo is referring here to some occult experience of one of the principal characters of the poem with all the dramatic subtleties and epical grandeurs inherently possible in the particular situation described. What is relevant to our purpose here is that this passage gives us a very faithful and vivid picture of the way of the working of the force of inspiration upon Sri Aurobindo's silent but receptive consciousness from above his head by the time he reached the very

1. *Savitri*, op. cit., Book I, Canto III, pp. 44-45.

summit, one may say, of his creative powers. And going through it as well as all those letters where he either refers to his own particular case or formulates some kind of a theory of it mostly based, of course, upon his own experience, we can easily see how in the case of a spiritual poet, at any rate, such as Sri Aurobindo was, we get an entirely new, almost unique idea of inspiration and its working and results.

Just how new and unique it is we can see if we put this passage beside the accounts given about it by a number of writers and artists mentioned in some of the recent British publications.

Dr. Rosamand E. M. Harding's "An Anatomy of Inspiration" (1948), Brewster Ghiselin's symposium on "The Creative Process" (1952), John Press's "The Fire and the Fountain" (1955) and Robin Skelton's "The Poetic Pattern" (1956), are just a few outstanding books available today to enable us to understand something of the way of the working of this elusive, mysterious power or faculty called inspiration. And they have given quite a number of illustrations from poets and artists, past and present, even some of the mathematicians and scientists, to show the variety of ways in which inspiration works. But even more than this, they seek to prove beyond any shadow of a doubt that even if there is such a thing as inspiration whose existence cannot be denied this alone is not sufficient and that the artists concerned have had to strive again and again either to induce in themselves that peculiar psychological condition of something like a trance which would once more call forth the power of inspiration to carry out the work to its finish with the help of whatever native intellectual, critical as well as imaginative powers they possessed, or to supplement the work of the original inspiration which had somehow vanished after a time, by their own conscious, artistic, chiefly technical labour at the whole organisation of the poetic structure. And it was when they carried it out, deliberately, patiently and perseveringly, even painfully, sometimes spread over a number of years, that something like a perfect mating between the inspiring idea and its verbal and rhythmic form could be achieved. Quite a number of poets mentioned in these books testify to the severe birth-pangs they have had to undergo in order to produce their best works, simply because they could not be sure of the help of the beneficent 'god' of inspiration. The following poem entitled *Invocation* by a modern poet

endowed with a very fine imaginative sensibility and technical mastery provides a typical example of the agony of creation we are considering here :

There is a poem on the way
 there is a poem all round me,
 the poem is in the near future,
 the poem is in the upper air
 above the foggy atmosphere
 it hovers, a spirit
 that I would make incarnate,
 Let my body sweat
 let snakes torment my breast
 my eyes be blind, ears deaf, hands distraught
 mouth parched, uterus cut out,
 belly slashed, back lashed,
 tongue slivered into thongs of leather
 rain stones inserted in my breasts,
 head severed,
 if only the lips may speak
 if only the god will come.

(Kathleen Raine)

Are we not reminded here, to a certain extent, of the prophet Isaiah who said that he could proclaim the Word of God only when his unclean lips had been purified by a seraph with a live coal in his hand ? But how very different in experience, tone, rhythm and general expression is the invocation by Sri Aurobindo to the similar concealed spirit of the inspiring Muse ! The uniqueness and surpassing majesty of the vision and style are unmistakable. The first few stanzas are as follows :

O word concealed in the upper fire
 Thou who hast lingered through centuries,
 Descend from thy rapt white desire,
 Plunging through gold eternities.

Into the gulfs of our nature leap,
 Voice of the spaces, call of the Light !
 Break the seals of Matter's sleep,
 Break the trance of the unseen height.

In the uncertain glow of human mind,
 Its waste of unharmonied thronging thoughts,
 Carve thy epic mountain-lined
 Crowded with deep prophetic grotts.

Let thy hue-winged lyrics hover like birds

Over the swirl of the heart's sea.
 Touch into sight with thy fire-words
 The blind indwelling deity.

O Muse of the Silence, the wideness make
 In the unplumbed stillness that hears thy voice
 In the vast mute heavens of the spirit awake
 Where the eagles of Power flame and rejoice.

(*Musa Spiritus* from *Poems, Past and Present*—Sri Aurobindo Ashram)

Like the passage from *Savitri* it is rather difficult to come across a similar composition from an English poet, howsoever highly and ecstatically inspired. We seem to be aware of the very living Word which, as the Scriptures all over the world say, has been there from the beginning behind all creation: "In the beginning was the Word."

It appears that except the fortunate few like Mozart, for example, the poets and artists can hardly feel sure of the power of inspiration, and their works are normally accompanied with sufficient amount of deliberate effort, struggle, tension and agony before they are able to attain their final form of beauty and perfection. A Shakespeare may have carried it off with a godlike ease and mastery, for it is said that he never blotted out a line. A Blake, with his hatred of logical analysis, might have exclaimed, as John Press says, that "a poem does not grow by discernible stages, since it is given to the poet in an instantaneous flash by the Angels of God when the doors of our perception have been cleansed".¹ An experience of the kind which Nietzsche had in connection with the production of his *Zarathustra* is certainly exceptional. As he himself says about it at length:

"Can anyone at the end of this nineteenth century possibly have any distinct notion of what poets of a more vigorous period meant by inspiration? If not, I should like to describe it. Provided one has the slightest remnant of the superstition left, one can hardly reject completely the idea that one is the mere incarnation, a mouthpiece, or medium of some almighty power. The notion of revelation describes the condition quite simply; by which I mean that something profoundly convulsive and disturbing suddenly becomes visible and audible with indescribable definiteness and exactness. One hears—one does not seek; one takes—one does not ask who gives: a thought

1. *Op. cit.*, p. 1.

flashes out like lightning, inevitably without hesitation—I have never had any choice about it. There is an ecstasy where terrific tension is sometimes released by a flood of tears.... There is a feeling that one is utterly out of hand, with the most distinct consciousness of an infinitude of shuddering thrills that pass through one from head to foot;—there is a profound happiness in which the most painful and gloomy feelings are not discordant in effect, but are required as necessary colours in this overflow of light. There is an instinct for rhythmic relations which embraces an entire world of forms (length, the need for a widely extended rhythm, is almost a measure of the force of inspiration, a sort of counterpart to its pressure and tension).... The spontaneity of the images and similes is most remarkable: one loses all perception of what is imagery and simile; everything offers itself as the most immediate, exact and simple means of expression.... This is my experience of inspiration. I have no doubt that I should have to go back millenniums to find another who could say to me: "It is mine also."¹

Herbert Read's achievement, as stated by him, is also clearly unusual. His statement may be quoted again:

"I can aver that all the poetry I have written which I continue to regard as authentic poetry was written immediately, instantaneously, in a condition of trance."²

But the usual manner of the working of what is known as inspiration and the modern artist's attitude towards it are fairly well brought out in the following statement of two modern poets, making due allowance, of course, for the necessary variations in individual cases. These may be taken as the expression of the typical Western view-point, particularly in this scientific, positivistic age of ours.

"Whether poetry is the fusion of contradictory ideas, as Mr. Graves believes, or the result and relief of emotional irritation and tension as Sara Teasdale puts it, or the yielding to a psychical state verging on day-dream, as Professor Prescott has written a whole book to prove, it is impossible for anyone to state definitely. All I can confidently assert from my own experience is that it is not day-dream, but an entirely different psychic state and one peculiar to itself.

"The truth is that there is a little mystery here, and one is more

1. Quoted in Brewster Ghiselin's book, *op. cit.*, pp. 202-203.

2. *Collected Essays in Literary Criticism*, Faber & Faber, 1938, p. 110.

conscious of it than the poet himself. Let us admit at once that a poet is something like a radio aerial—he is capable of receiving messages on waves of some sort; but he is more than an aerial, for he possesses the capacity of transmuting these messages into those patterns of words we call poems.

“It would seem that a scientific definition of a poet might put it something like this: a man of an extraordinarily sensitive and active subconscious personality, fed by, and feeding a non-resistant consciousness. A common phrase among poets is, ‘It came to me.’ So hackneyed has this become that one learns to suppress the expression with care, but really it is the best description I know of the conscious arrival of a poem....

“Some poets speak of hearing a voice speaking to them, and say that they write almost to dictation.... I do not hear a voice, but I do hear words pronounced, only the pronouncing is toneless. The words seem to be pronounced in my head, but with nobody speaking them....

“The subconscious is, however, a most temperamental ally. Often he will strike work at some critical point and not another word is to be got out of him. Here is where the conscious training of the poet comes in, for he must fill in what the subconscious has left, and fill in as much in the key of the rest as possible.... This is the reason that a poet must be both born and made. He must be born with a subconscious factory always working for him or he never can be a poet at all, and he must have knowledge and talent enough to ‘putty’ up his holes—to use Mr. Graves’s expression. Let no one undervalue this process of puttying; it is a condition of good poetry. Of the many first manuscript drafts of great poets that have passed through my hands in the last twenty-five years, I have seen none without its share of putty, and the one of all most worked over is Keats’s ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’.”¹

Here it may be interesting to compare this statement with the views of Sri Aurobindo on the uncertainty of the inspirational help. It is significant that whereas Amy Lowell pins the whole thing down to the Subconscious and its working only, Sri Aurobindo speaks of the force of inspiration in general and not of any particular source or plane of it.

“Inspiration is always a very uncertain thing; it comes when

1. Amy Lowell’s essay on *The Process of Making Poetry* reproduced in Brewster Ghiselin’s *The Creative Process*, pp. 109-111.

it chooses, stops suddenly before it has finished its work, refuses to descend when it is called. This is a well-known affliction perhaps of all artists, but certainly of poets. There are some who can command it at will; those who, I think, are more full of an abundant poetic energy than careful for perfection; others who oblige it to come whenever they put pen to paper but with these the inspiration is either not a high order or quite unequal in its levels. Again there are some who try to give it a habit of coming by always writing at the same time; Virgil with his nine lines first written, then perfected every morning; Milton with his fifty epic lines a day, are said to have succeeded in regularising their inspiration.... For myself, when the inspiration did not come with a rush or in a stream,—for then there is no difficulty—I had only one way, to allow a certain kind of incubation in which a large form of the thing to be done threw itself on the mind and then wait for the white heat in which the entire transcription could rapidly take place. But I think each poet has his own way of working and finds his own issue out of inspiration's incertitudes.”¹

It is clear that Sri Aurobindo would not perhaps agree with Amy Lowell that the process of ‘puttying’ in which she believes so much is “a condition of good poetry.”

Here the key statement is the one where Amy Lowell speaks of a poet as “a man of an extraordinarily sensitive and active subconscious personality, fed by, and feeding a non-resistant consciousness” and that is why so much stress is laid on the working of the subconscious. But this, unfortunately, is “a most temperamental ally” and, therefore, not always to be relied upon, and constantly helped and disciplined into proper behaviour by “the conscious training of the poet”. That is why it is essential, according to Amy Lowell, that the poet “must have knowledge and talent enough to ‘putty’ up his holes—to use Mr. Graves’s expression”.

Let us now turn to Stephen Spender who has also something very interesting and significant to say on the matter. After citing some illustrations of phrases and lines which he received at first by way of inspiration but which had to be worked out by him with a good deal of conscious labour he says:

“The hard work evinced in these examples, which are only a fraction of the work put into the whole poem, may cause

1. *Life, Literature, Yoga*, op. cit. p. 77.

the reader to wonder whether there is no such thing as inspiration, or whether it is merely Stephen Spender who is uninspired. The answer is that everything in poetry is work except inspiration, whether this work is achieved at one swift stroke, as Mozart wrote his music, or whether it is a slow process of evolution from stage to stage....

"Inspiration is the beginning of a poem and it is also its final goal. It is the first idea which drops into the poet's mind and it is the final idea which he at least achieves in words. In between this start and this winning post there is a hard race, the sweat and toil.

Paul Valéry speaks of the "une ligne donnée" of a poem. The line is given to the poet by God or by Nature, the rest he has to discover for himself.¹

Here the existence and ultimate efficacy of inspiration are no doubt recognised but greater importance and value are attached to the conscious labour, "the sweat and toil" of the poet. Indeed, one finds that some reference to "pressure" and "terrific tension" underlying the ecstasy of the inspirational afflatus is not entirely absent even from Nietzsche's inspired description of how he came to create his *Zarathustra*. Even Shelley, a born, inspired poet with considerable facility and fertility of composition, did not think, it appears, that one could fully depend upon, or be in perfect accord with, the power of inspiration for getting the best possible results. Typical of the man of the West, he thought that the creative faculty of man was the mind, but whether it was conscious or subconscious is not quite clear. Probably, it was subconscious, for he said that "the mind in creation is as a fading coal" and it needed, therefore, "some invisible influence", - unfortunately "like an inconstant wind" - to be "awakened to transitory brightness". This "invisible influence" of inspiration arose, according to him "from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed" but "the conscious portions of our nature" could not be sure of, and, therefore, could not prophesy the time and occasion of "its approach or its departure". As things are, therefore, and as, unluckily, this influence could not be made "durable in its original purity and force", by the time the actual "composition begins", i.e. the whole process of labour and struggle of writing—

1. Spender: *The Making of a Poem*, *Partisan Review*, Summer, 1946, reprinted in Ghiselin's book, op. cit., pp. 117-118.

most probably by the conscious portions of our nature—, quite naturally “inspiration is already on the decline” and, consequently, in spite of the best possible efforts made by the poet, the genuine sweat and toil, pressure and tension undergone by the conscious artist, “the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet”.* It is a great pity no doubt and one can but regret the tragedy of the whole situation.

Such being the usual circumstances of the case, it is not surprising if even such an intelligent and broad-minded critic of poetry as John Press who considers that theory of poetic composition which ignores “the reality of inspiration” as “both shallow and provincial”¹ should make an observation of the following sceptical and doubtful nature:

“It is possible to maintain that inspiration comes from God, from Heavenly Wisdom, from seraphim, or from any member of the angelic hierarchy who chances to strike a responsive chord in the myth-making faculty of the poet. Possible but not essential. It is equally plausible to hold that inspiration is the product of mental disequilibrium, dreams, or of the unconscious activity of the mind.”²

No wonder if, in course of his book—very felicitously entitled *The Fire and the Fountain* though—in which he sought to estimate the significance of that eternal “moment”, as Blake said, in which “the God’s work is done” and the “crystal flowing” “Fountain” of inspiration, as it were, gushes forth, he, in fact, relates poetry mostly to madness, delirium and dreams, “the operation of the fruitful sensuality”, the working of the Freudian subconscious or unconscious mind, and Jung’s collective unconscious, even the Marxist theory of dialectical materialism, and postulates, as the publishers of the book say, that “a poet is a man who is gifted with an universally powerful physical sensibility together with an unusually strong feeling for the formal properties of language”. Well, the best that one can say about his observations on the poetic creation, as also Brewster Ghiselin’s on the creative process and Dr. Rosamand Harding’s on the anatomy of inspiration is that as far as the general experience of the thing is concerned, their explanation

* All quotations here are taken from Shelley’s essay: *A Defence of Poetry*.

1. Op. cit., p. 27.

2. Op. cit., pp. 4-5.

and interpretation may be found rationally and logically plausible. But it is certainly doubtful whether, for all their brilliant scientific analysis of the sources of inspiration such as has been experienced, at any rate, by some of the greatest artists and poets of the world, they have really succeeded in getting a true insight into, or vision of, the "Goddess who, luminous and serene"—as John Press himself illuminatingly enough observed at the end of his opening chapter,—"remains the primal source of that light which irradiates the poet."¹

Not that we in our consciousness have reached the stage yet when we may justifiably say that we are in full contact with this "luminous and serene" but equally mysterious and elusive "Goddess", and not even the poets and artists of supreme excellence may yet claim that they are in complete possession of "the primal source of that light which irradiates" their creation in secret. Could the invisible influence of this source "be durable", as Shelley said, "in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results." Such a thing is yet to happen in English poetry, no doubt. What makes Sri Aurobindo's critical position, as also his poetic achievement, remarkable, even unique, in this connection, is that he seems to give us the impression, both as a poet and prose writer, that somehow—no doubt through a long continuous *sadhana* of a supremely difficult, because integral character—he could make such an "invisible influence" durable in its "original purity and force" in himself and that is why both his experience of the working of inspiration and its positive creative results in his own poetry and prose, notably in *Savitri* and *The Life Divine*—and one may also add *The Future Poetry*—are so very different from what we find elsewhere. The luminosity, the serenity, the radiance of which John Press speaks, and the "original purity and force" to which Shelley refers, are all present in him in a richly varied and potent measure.

Even his prose statement about inspiration—the one indispensable condition, according to him, for the poetic creation² is luminously original and different from the accounts given in the books referred to above. "What we mean by inspiration", he says, "is that the impetus to poetic creation and utterance comes to us from our super-

1. Op. cit., p. 27.

2. "Where there is no inspiration there can be no poetry"—L3, p. 77.

conscient source above the ordinary mentality, so that what is written seems not to be the fabrication of the brain-mind, but something more sovereign breathed or poured from above.”¹ It is not through the subconscious, whether individual or collective, or the nervous though “fruitful sensuality”, nor “the fabrication of the brain-mind” that inspiration, according to Sri Aurobindo, really works. On the contrary, it is some “superconscient source above the ordinary mentality” here the ordinary mentality includes the human intellect as we know it—which is the true fountain of artistic creation.²

In this connection the following observations by one of his disciples made in connection with John Press’s book, referred to above, are pertinent enough:

“Like the ether in science the modern critics have invented “the unconscious”. Just as the scientist had to ascribe contradictory attributes to the ether, similarly the modern psychologist very facilely accounts for the lowest and the highest modes of consciousness as having originated from the unconscious. On the one hand, the unconscious seems to be a dark underground cellar where the light has never shone and which is teeming with the grossest impulses that suddenly burst through the screen and disrupt the whole moral fabric of our life and, on the other, the poet is the mouthpiece of oracular utterances of the spiritual Truth.... Modern psychology and literature are to be congratulated for their boldness to peer into this opaque and impenetrable substratum of things; for, any idealism that does not take into account the abyss, where, in the

1. *F.P.*, pp. 236-37.

2. “Many of our poets and artists have been influenced by this power (i.e., ‘the great Unconscious, the dark and mysterious and all-powerful subconscious’), some even sought to enter into that region and become its denizens. But artistic inspiration is an emanation of Light; whatever may be the field of its play, it can have its origin only in the higher spheres, if it is to be truly beautiful and not merely curious and scientific.”—Nolini Kanta Gupta: op. cit., p. 53.

And not only “artistic inspiration” but all things, in fact, emanate from the plane of Light. As Sri Aurobindo himself in one of his letters said, adroitly and wittily exposing the insufficiency of psycho-analysis as a source of knowledge: “the superconscient, not the subconscious, is the true foundation of things. The significance of the lotus is not to be found by analysing the secrets of the mud from which it grows here; its secret is to be found in the heavenly archetype of the lotus that blooms for ever in the Light above.” (*Bases of Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1941, p. 123).

Vedic phrase, "darkness is enveloped in darkness" can only palliate our ills for a while yet never root out the malady. But how shall we account for the higher and still higher modes of consciousness that have emerged from it—the plant, the animal and the man who is perpetually called to transcend himself by rising to super-conscious planes? Surely, as Sri Aurobindo says, this void of nescience is a mask worn by the omniscient Divine.... Modern criticism of poetry is mostly derived from the current psychological trends and great poets and critics all tend to trace the origin of poetic inspiration to the unconscious.¹ But nothing is explained when you lump with the most savage instincts the most luminous visions of the sun of poetic truth."²

But even if the theory of the "Unconscious" is accepted as true and capable enough to explain quite a multitude of our feelings, thoughts and acts, including the poetic and artistic, it should be considered in its full implication as, for example, Sri Aurobindo tries to do at several places. His poem, "Shiva the Inconscient" and his own brief note appended to it are sufficiently helpful to indicate Sri Aurobindo's attitude towards what in the West is known as the 'Unconscious' but should be properly called 'the Inconscient'. As he says:

"The Inconscient as the source and author of all material creation is one of the main discoveries of modern psychology, but it agrees with the idea of a famous Vedic hymn. In the Upanishads, Prajna, the Master of Sushupti, is the Ishwara and therefore the original Creator out of a Super-conscious sleep. The idea of the poem is that this creative Inconscient also is Shiva creating here life in matter out of an apparently inconscient material trance as from above he creates all the worlds (not material only) from a super-

1. There are one or two exceptions no doubt, for example, Shelley said in *A Defence of Poetry* that poetry "acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness". Also, A. Quiller-Couch in his essay on *Poetry* said, "... the Poet's way of apprehending the Universal is... by keeping true to himself, attending to his soul's inner harmony, and listening, waiting, brooding with a 'wise passiveness' until the moment when his and the larger harmony fall into tune together. The Psalmist describes the process accurately: 'while I was thus musing, the fire kindled, and at the last I spoke with my tongue'—quoted on p. 108 of *The World of Poetry*.

Nietzsche's experience, as given before, is also an exception to the usually held theory of the Unconscious.

2. Ravindra Khanna's article on *Poetry and the "Unconscious"*, published in *Mother India*, September, 1947.

conscient trance. The reality is a supreme Consciousness—but that is veiled by the appearance on one side of the superconscient sleep, on the other of the material Inconscience.”¹

It is evident that it is when we learn to see the whole process of artistic or poetic creation against the background of such an integrally unified metaphysical truth of reality that we can get a better idea of the whole matter. Both the theories of the Unconscious and the Conscious which have been advanced so far in the West to explain the phenomenon of artistic creation are, therefore, but partially true and effective, since the existence of the Superconscient is not taken into account at all. But it is not with the inspiration coming from “the Inconscient” that Sri Aurobindo really works. On the contrary, he invariably seeks contacts with the regions above and has been richly rewarded as well.

There are quite a number of regions above what we know as the ordinary mentality and due credit must be given to Sri Aurobindo who has opened them out to us in as precise a language as is possible for us to understand with our present intellectual faculty. The whole thing, however, begins to be easily and gradually accessible to the power of intuitive seeing and feeling and apprehending which lies mostly untapped in us. The psychic being seated within each one of us holds the real key to all these effulgent kingdoms. For a somewhat detailed description of the main mansions of the Superconscient we may read through pages 254-55 of *The Life Divine* (American Edition).² But for our immediate purpose here the following observations made in connection with “overhead inspiration” or “the overhead note in poetry” in the third series of his letters where he mentions four distinct super-conscient or overhead regions namely, those of the Higher Mind, the Illumined Mind, the Intuitive Mind and the Overmind, should be quite sufficient:

“The higher thought has a strong tread often with bare unsandaled feet and moves in a clearcut light: a divine power, measure, dignity is its most frequent character. The outflow of the illumined mind comes in a flood brilliant with revealing words or a light of crowding images, some-

1. Collected Poems and Plays, Vol. II, De Luxe Edn., Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1942, p. 289.

2. See Appendix at the end of this chapter.

times surcharged with its burden of revelations, sometimes with a luminous sweep.¹ The intuition is usually a lightning flash showing up a single spot or plot of ground or scene with an entire and miraculous completeness of vision to the surprised ecstasy of the inner eye; its rhythm has a decisive inevitable sound which leaves nothing essential unheard, but very commonly is embodied in a single stroke."²

In one of his letters he distinguishes the poetry of the Illumined Mind from that of the Intuition thus:

"The poetry of the Illumined Mind is usually full of a play of lights and colours, brilliant and striking in phrase, for illumination makes the Truth vivid—it acts usually by a luminous rush. The poetry of the Intuition may have play of colour and bright lights, but it does not depend on them it may be quite bare, it tells by a sort of close intimacy with the Truth, an inward expression of it. The Illumined Mind sometimes gets rid of its trappings, but even then it always keeps a sort of lustrousness of the robe which is its characteristic."³

Still higher up in the scale is what he calls the Overmind which "thinks in a mass" and "its thought, feeling, vision is high or deep or wide or all these things together: to use the Vedic messenger about fire, the divine messenger, it goes vast on its way to bring the divine riches, and it has a corresponding language and rhythm."⁴

These various regions or levels of the Overhead consciousness are, however, "only general or dominant characters" and "any number of variations is possible" as far as their actual working upon the human consciousness is concerned; and what is more, "...there are, besides, mingled inspirations, several levels meeting and combining or modifying each other's notes".⁵ Particularly, "an overmind transmission can contain or bring with it all the rest".⁶

It is to this phenomenon of "mingled inspirations" that he is clearly referring when he wrote to a disciple

1. Sri Aurobindo refers to it in *The Life Divine* in a more colourful and synthetic language. It comes out in "an outpouring of massive lightnings of flaming sun-stuff" (p. 254, American Edition).

2. *L3.*, pp. 116-17.

3. *L.L.Y.*, p. 32.

4. *L. 3*, p. 116.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

about *Savitri* when it was still in its early stages of composition, "The poem was originally written from a mixture perhaps of the inner mind, psychic, poetic intelligence, subliminal vital, afterwards with the Higher Mind, often illumined and intuitivised, intervening."¹ But this was not sufficient for him and he went on revising and recasting it, for his aim was "to lift the general level higher and higher towards a possible Overmind poetry"² and it was not till 1936 that he could say, "As it now stands, there is a general Overmind influence, I believe, sometimes coming fully through, sometimes colouring the poetry of the other higher planes fused together. . . ."³ This being the case, it is no wonder if he went on working at it till his passing away in 1950 so that the whole of it should come up to the full and perfect level of what he calls the Overmind aesthesis.

And as regards his mode of working at it, i.e., the task of revision and recasting, the following letter written in the same year (1936) is clear enough to suggest the difference between him and the usual run of inspired poets and artists.

"I do not 'think' about the technique because thinking is no longer in my line. But I see and feel for it when the lines are coming through and afterwards in revision of the work. I do not bother about details while writing, because that would only hamper the inspiration. I let it come through without interference; only pausing if there is an obvious inadequacy felt, in which case I conclude that it is a wrong inspiration or inferior level that has cut across the communication. If the inspiration is the right one, then I have not to bother about the technique then or afterwards, for this carries through the perfect line with the perfect rhythm inextricably intertwined or rather fused into an inseparable and single unity; if there is anything wrong with the expression, that carries with it an imperfection in the rhythm—if there is a flaw in the rhythm the expression also does not carry its full weight, is not absolutely inevitable. If, on the other hand, the inspiration is not throughout the right one, then there is an after-examination and recasting of part or whole."⁴

It is a peculiar case of what may be appropriately

1. *Letters on 'Savitri'*, op. cit., p. 3.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

called a conscious, fully-alert receptivity to inspiration; one may even call it a detached 'critical' receptivity, for all the time the nature and quality of the inspiration are being checked and tested particularly through some intuitive feeling for the rhythm of the lines coming down. And yet, the whole process goes on without any mental thinking on his part which is ordinarily the case. Both the receptivity of the original inspiration and the labour of its checking and testing are, as it were, intuitive, spontaneous and natural, unaccompanied by any kind of mental, emotional or physical sensation or nervous pressure and tension, or pain and agony. And yet how very scrupulously exacting is the intuitive critical mind all through and, at the same time, how very fruitfully complete is the reliance upon, and opening to, the force of inspiration coming from above are clear from the following :

"The things I lay most stress on are whether each line is itself the inevitable thing not only as a whole but in each word; whether there is the right distribution of sentence lengths (an immensely important thing in this kind of blank verse);¹ whether the lines are in their right place, for all the lines may be perfect but they may not combine perfectly together—bridges may be needed, alteration of position so as to create the right development and perspective. Pauses hardly exist in this kind of blank verse; variations of rhythm, as between the lines, of caesura, of the distribution of long and short, clipped and open syllables, manifold constructions of vowel and consonant sounds, alliterations, assonances etc., distribution into one-line, two-line, three or four or five-line, many-line sentences, care to make each line tell by itself in its own mass and force and at the same time form a harmonious whole sentence—these are the important things. *But all that is usually taken care of by the inspiration itself, for as I know and have the habit of the technique, the inspiration provides what I want according to standing orders.*² If there is a defect I appeal to headquarters, till a proper version comes along or the defect is removed by a word or phrase substitute that flashes—with the necessary sound and sense. These things are not done by thinking or seeking for the right thing—the two agents are sight and call. Also feeling—the solar plexus has to be satisfied and, until it is, revision after revision has to continue. *I may add*

1. He is referring to his epic *Savitri*.

2. Italics mine.

*that the technique does not go by any set mental rule—for the object is not perfect technical elegance according to precepts but sound-significance filling out the word-significance.** If that can be done by breaking rules, well, so much the worse for the rules.”¹

His aim throughout *Savitri* was, as has been stated before, to reach “a perfect perfection”. Quite naturally the recasting, whenever necessary, had to be thorough, and had to be taken every time to a higher and higher level of inspiration and achievement. That is why, he had to say, “It is not a question of making a few changes in individual lines, that is a very minor problem; the real finality only comes when all is felt as a perfect whole, no line jarring with or falling away from the level of the whole though some may rise above it and also all the parts in their proper place making the right harmony. It is an inner feeling that has to decide that. . . . Unfortunately the mind can’t arrange these things, and has to wait till the absolutely right thing comes in a sort of receptive self-opening and calling-down condition. Hence the months.”²

Nor is it possible for the mind to understand properly the working of this aesthesis. None was more aware of this than he himself and he had to confess more than once, “. . . these are exactly the subjects on which it is difficult to write with any precision or satisfy the intellect’s demand for clear and positive statement”.³ And yet as much clarification as was necessary for one’s genuine mental understanding had to be made, and in a quite long letter he had to explain it and its intelligible implications as best as possible with suitable quotations from English poetry, which, unfortunately, are but few and far between. The whole letter which is included in the last section of *Letters on “Savitri”* and also in *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, 3rd Series (pp. 107-137) has to be properly studied in order to get some clear intellectual conception of this new overhead plane of aesthesis or, overmental creative inspiration which Sri Aurobindo has revealed to our vision. It is just possible that those serious-minded poets and artists of today who are keenly desirous of breaking really new and deeper grounds may find it

* Italics mine.

1. Ibid., p. 5.

2. Ibid., p. 5.

3. Ibid., p. 55

profitable to themselves. In any case, this is one of his principal and most illuminating and original contributions to aesthetics.

Sri Aurobindo says, "As we climb beyond Mind, higher and wider values replace the values of our limited mind, life and bodily consciousness. Aesthesis shares in this intensification of capacity.... As it enters the overhead planes the ordinary aesthesis turns into a pure delight and becomes capable of a high, large or a deep abiding ecstasy.... Another change in this transition is a turn towards universality in place of the isolations, the conflicting generalities, the mutually opposing dualities of the lower consciousness. In the Overmind we have a first firm foundation of the experience of a universal beauty, a universal love, a universal delight".¹ It is not that we cannot have this experience of a universal beauty and delight altogether on the mental and vital planes, but here it is but a "temporary experience" and also "limited" in its field and does not "touch the whole being". Here we get at best a glimpse and a foretaste and that too for a short while only. But when we rise to the overhead consciousness it becomes "more and more the law of the vision and the law of the nature".² "Wherever the overmind spiritual man turns he sees a universal beauty touching and uplifting all things.... a universal love goes out from him to all beings; he feels the Bliss which has created the worlds and upholds them and all that is expresses to him the universal delight."³ Indeed, "the Overmind consciousness sees the object with a totality which changes its effect on the percipient even while it remains the same thing. It sees lines and masses and an underlying design which the physical eye does not see and which escapes even the keenest mental vision. Every form becomes beautiful to it in a deeper and larger sense of beauty than that commonly known to us. The Overmind looks also straight at and into the soul of each thing and not only at its form or its significance to the mind or to the life; this brings to it not only the true truth of the thing but the delight of it. It sees also the one spirit in all, the face of the Divine everywhere and there can be no greater Ananda than that.... In all this the overmind aesthesis

1. *L3.*, pp. 124-25.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 125-26.

takes its share and gives its response; for these things come not merely as an idea in the mind or a truth-seeing but as an experience of the whole being and a total response is not only possible but above a certain level imperative."¹

Ordinarily, we make a distinction between truth and beauty. We generally think that truth is no better than "a dry statement of facts or ideas to or by the intellect".² But we forget that "there can be an aesthetic response to truth also, a joy in its beauty, a love created by its charm, a rapture in the finding...an aesthetic joy in its expression".³ The poet, therefore, can be also a seeker and lover of truth as well as a seeker and lover of beauty, as he is generally taken to be. "He can feel a poetic and aesthetic joy in the expression of the true as well as in the expression of the beautiful."⁴ This, at any rate, comes quite naturally to one who has developed the overmental aesthetic consciousness, for on the level of the Overmind "truth and beauty not only become constant companions but become one, involved in each other, inseparable: on that level the true is also beautiful and the beautiful is always true."⁵

We may take it, then, that Keats caught a glimpse of this experience when he ended his *Ode on a Grecian Urn* by saying, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty..." though we may not quite agree with him that this is "all" we need to know, for unless we take Truth in the highest all-embracing universal sense, there are other things like love and delight and power and peace which we also need to know in the same measure as beauty and truth.

Indeed, on the overmental plane of consciousness and aesthesis, "truth itself is highest poetry"⁶ and it is from here that there springs "the mystery of the inevitable word, the supreme immortal rhythm, the absolute significance and the absolute utterance".⁷ It is, therefore, when the poet's inspiration is derived from this "overmind's greater, larger and deeper aesthesis"⁸ that he

1. Ibid., pp. 126-27.

2. Ibid., p. 128.

3. Ibid., pp. 127-28.

4. Ibid., p. 128.

5. Ibid., p. 129.

6. Ibid., p. 130.

7. Ibid., p. 130.

8. Ibid., p. 130.

becomes a master of "the really immortal tones of speech and heights of creation".¹ It is then that he becomes the creator of the truly great poetry, i.e., the kind of poetry which is as good as the *mantra*.

This, however, should not lead us to think that the greatness or perfection in poetry cannot be achieved on the levels lower than the Overmind. An interesting as well as a vitally important question which arises here is whether the poetry of the overmental inspiration and aesthesis is superior, *qua* poetry, to that of the mental, vital or subtle-physical sources of inspiration. Sri Aurobindo is very clear on this point and puts us sufficiently on our guard when he says more than once by way of general rule that the greatness of the poetry as poetry does not necessarily depend on the level from which it is written. "When I say that a line comes from a higher or overhead plane or has the Overmind's touch I do not mean that it is superior in pure poetic excellence to others from lower planes.... I simply mean that it has some vision, light etc. from up there and the character of its expression and rhythm are from there....the overhead touch....carries in it a great depth or height or width of spiritual vision, feeling or experience."²

This is also true that "the higher poetry" has a technique of its own a technique which "is not analysable and teachable".³ The fact is that "in ordinary poetry the mind can play about, chop and change, use one image or another, put this word here and that word there if the sense is much the same and has a poetical value...." But in the overhead poetry, the technique required is that "it must be the right word and no other, in the right place and in no other, the right sound and no other, in a design of sound that cannot be changed even a little....these things are quite imperative....".⁴ And to realise whether the words, sounds, rhythms and images are right and in their right places "one must have the inner sight and inner ear for these things; one must be able to hear the sound-meaning, feel the sound-spaces with their vibrations".⁵

And yet in spite of all these indispensable factors of

1. *F.P.*, p. 238.

2. *L3.*, p. 92.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

this poetry his view is that it is "not necessarily greater or more perfect than any other kind of poetry".¹

At the same time, he would like us to consider properly "a subtle qualification" which he makes to this general statement. "It is true", he says, "that each kind of poetical writing can reach a highest or perfect perfection in its own line and in its own quality.... But then what do we mean by the perfection of poetry? There is the perfection of the language and there is the perfection of the word-music and the rhythm, beauty of speech and beauty of sound, but there is also the quality of the thing said which counts for something. If we consider only word and sound and what in themselves they evoke, we arrive at the application of the theory of art for art's sake to poetry. On that ground we might say that a lyric of Anacreon is as good poetry and as perfect poetry as anything in Aeschylus or Sophocles or Homer. The question of the elevation or depth or intrinsic beauty of the thing said cannot then enter into our consideration of poetry; and yet it does enter, with most of us at any rate, and is part of the aesthetic reaction even in the most "aesthetic" of critics and readers. From this point of view the elevation from which the inspiration comes may after all matter, provided the one who receives it is a fit and powerful instrument; for a great poet will do more with a lower level of the origin of inspiration than a smaller poet can do even when helped from the highest sources."² This is a quite sound and sensible defence of the superiority of the poetic merit of overhead composition while recognising at the same time the poetic merit of the achievement made by one who is writing from the lower levels of consciousness and inspiration. The critical method and attitude are typical of the sanity, good sense and integrity of which Sri Aurobindo seems to be a perfect embodiment both in life and letters. This is why he does not fail to convince us, ultimately, of the over-all greatness and superiority of the artist who is capable enough to draw upon the overhead inspiration. "In a certain sense", he, therefore, continues to say, "all genius comes from Overhead; for genius is the entry, or inrush of a greater consciousness into the mind or a possession of the mind by a greater power. Every opera-

1. Ibid., p. 131.

2. Ibid., pp. 131-32.

tion of genius has at its back or infused within it an intuition, a revelation, an inspiration, an illumination or at the least a hint or touch or influx from some greater power or level of conscious being than those which men ordinarily possess or use.”¹ Still, the very presence of genius in someone does not mean that he is invariably carried on to a completely different and higher plane of consciousness and creation. The fact is that it may operate in either of the two ways: “in one way it touches the ordinary modes of mind and deepens, heightens, intensifies or exquisitely refines their action but without changing its modes or transforming its normal character; in the other it brings down with these normal modes something of itself, something supernormal, something which one at once feels to be extraordinary and suggestive of a superhuman level”.² Now, a sensible man cannot fail to notice that “both these two ways of action when working in poetry may produce things equally exquisite and beautiful”³ and yet one cannot fail to see at the same time, if one is sensitive, unprejudiced and detached enough, that “the word ‘greater’ may perhaps be applied, with the necessary qualifications, to the second way and its too rare poetic creation”.⁴

However, this second category of poetry, i.e., the one written from the Overhead power will not be ordinarily all of a piece. Sri Aurobindo again makes a subtle distinction. We may have here, says he, “two or perhaps three levels”. In one, for example, we may see that the overhead touch has come through “a felicitous turn or an unusual force of language or a deeper note of feeling...”⁵ But more often, “it is the power of the rhythm that lifts up language that is simple and common or a feeling or idea that has often been expressed and awakes something which is not ordinarily there”.⁶ But in order to feel this we have to listen to the sense and music a little more profoundly than “with the mind only or from the vital centre only”.⁷ If we can succeed in doing so, we can feel perhaps, as he says, the spirit

1. Ibid., p. 132.

2. Ibid., pp. 132-33.

3. Ibid., p. 133.

4. Ibid., p. 133.

5. Ibid., p. 133.

6. Ibid., p. 133.

7. Ibid., p. 133.

of the Universe lending its own depth to our mortal speech or listening from behind to some expression of itself, listening perhaps to its memories of:

Old unhappy far-off things

Add battles long ago

or feeling and hearing, it may be said, the vast oceanic stillness and the cry of the cuckoo

Breaking the silence of the seas

Among the farthest Hebrides

or it may enter into Vyasa's

"A void and dreadful forest ringing with the cricket's cry."

(*Vanam pratibhayam śūnyam jhillikāganānīnāditam*)

or remember its call to the soul of man

"Thou who hast come to this transient and unhappy world,
love and worship Me."

(*Anityam asukham lokam iman prīpya bhajasva mam.*)¹

On the second level "poetry draws into itself a fuller language of intuitive inspiration, illumination or the higher thinking and feeling".² And his view is that "many of the most powerful passages in Shakespeare, Virgil or Lucretius or the Mahabharata and Ramayana, not to speak of the Gita, the Upanishads or the Rig Veda have this inspiration".³ In a quite picturesque language he says, "it is a poetry 'thick inlaid with patines of bright gold' or welling up in a stream of passion, beauty and force".⁴

But there is a level still higher than this. Here, he says, "there comes down a supreme voice, the overmind voice and the overmind music and it is to be observed that the lines and passages where that happens rank amongst the greatest and most admired in all poetic literature".⁵ This is what we are sure to find in what is known as the *Mantra* in our Indian literature, - the kind of thing we find in the Vedas, the Upanishads and passages of the Gita, for the *Mantra* is "what comes from the overmind inspiration". But ordinarily "the Overmind inspiration does not come out pure in human poetry. . . . there is usually a mixture of the two elements, the uplifting influence and the lower stuff of mind".⁶

1. Ibid., p. 134.

2. Ibid., p. 135.

3. Ibid., p. 135.

4. Ibid., p. 135.

5. Ibid., p. 135.

6. Ibid., pp. 97-98.

The fact is that the Overmind being a superhuman consciousness, "to be able to write always or purely from an Overmind inspiration would mean the elevation of at least a part of the nature beyond the human level".¹ That is to say, it involves the question of a wholly radical change in the human consciousness itself. However, now that *Savitri* is with us, we may say that such a thing is now possible even on a grand epical scale, and in the English language, too, at that. Of course, we must not omit to remark that for this to be possible it is necessary to have the kind of Overmental consciousness and genius which Sri Aurobindo possessed and dynamised through poetry and literature. However, as he has been able to discover for us, some single examples of it can be also had in English poetry. Referring to the following verses

And marble face, the index of a mind

Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone,

(Wordsworth: *The Prelude*)

Those thoughts that wander through eternity (*Milton*)

Sri Aurobindo remarks: "One has the sense here of a rhythm which does not begin or end with the line, but has for ever been sounding in the eternal planes and began even in Time ages ago and which returns to the infinite to go sounding on for ages after. In fact, the word-rhythm is only part of what we hear, a support for the rhythm we listen to behind in "the Ear of the ear", *shrotasya shrotam*. To a certain extent, that is what all great poetry tries to have, but it is only the Overmind rhythm to which it is natural and easy as breathing and in which it is not only behind the word-rhythm but gets into the word-movement itself and finds a kind of fully supporting body there."²

Although it is not necessary to be a practising mystic in order to catch something of the Overhead inspiration, yet humanity, including its creative artists and poets, has not advanced so high up in its consciousness as to be in contact with this creative power for long. Indeed, if poets like Dante, Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth have been able to receive something from its higher regions at certain sudden lucid moments, these may be taken to be lucky accidents in literary history. This is why Sri Aurobindo says: "To get the Overmind

1. Ibid., p. 98.

2. Ibid., p. 96.

inspiration through is so rare that there are only a few lines or short passages in all poetic literature that give at least some appearance or reflection of it.”¹

K. D. Sethna, too, observes in course of an illuminating description of the working of the four-fold gradation of Overhead inspiration :

“On all these planes the experience of the Infinite is automatic and there is a light of direct knowledge of the universe’s fundamental being and becoming. But the light varies in intensity. The higher mind is like a broad clear day revealing through a spiritual rather than intellectual thought the divine substance and its multiform activity : it is, as it were, the archetype of the mental Miltonic,² the plane active behind Milton’s grand style but unable to send its own spiritual stuff of thought in an authentic shape and motion through his genius. The illumined mind is more a luminous seeing than a luminous thinking : it is a play of spiritual sight, the divine secrecies are disclosed through a crowd of colourful yet subtle images in a swift or slow design with thought as a subordinate element. One may say it is the plane active behind Shakespeare’s leap and coruscation and felicitous ingenuity of the life-force but mostly translated into vivid passion and sensation and idea-impluse instead of being transmitted in its multi-toned seerhood of divine values. Intuition is not what usually passes by that name, a quick abbreviated movement of thought itself or a rapid seizing through the vital drive : it is a profound penetration into the essence of things by a spontaneous inner intimacy on a superhuman level. It differs from the illumined mind in that it is a flash by which divine realities bare themselves rather than are bared by a flood of illumination thrown upon them. Heart-beat upon essential heart-beat of Truth is felt more than Truth’s opulent limb-gesture, and robe-undulation. Intuition is at work behind the revealing reticence that is the Dantesque utterance, only, the style of the decisive sparing stroke in *La Divine Commedia* mostly converts into a mental incisiveness the sheer piercing Truth-touch.

1. Ibid., p. 4.

2. Sri Aurobindo considers the substance of Milton’s poetry as, “except at certain heights, mental—mentally grand and noble”—*L.L.T.*, p. 38.

In another letter, too, he points out that Milton’s “architecture of thought and verse is high and powerful and massive, but there are usually no subtle echoes there, no deep chambers : the occult things in man’s being are foreign to his intelligence”—*L3.*, pp. 118-19.

Even in that touch, however, the direct knowledge is not complete; the whole sense of the divine being and becoming is not caught in pure identity. The entire directness is really the privilege of the Supermind, a sovereign truth-consciousness that is the special dynamic of the Aurobindonian Yoga, but a radiant representative of it is possessed by the Overmind which is what the world has hitherto known as the extreme Godhead. Also the Overmind vision, word and rhythm are at once intense and immense to the utmost. The line of poetry charged with them carries vastly a movement as if from everlasting to everlasting—thought, image, expression, vibration bear a value and a form in which all the qualities of the other planes fuse in something diversely ultimate and variously transfigured by an inmost oneness with the cosmic harmony and with the supracosmic mystery. The voice of the Overmind is the *mantra*, the eternal word spoken of and sought for by the Vedic Rishis.”¹

In modern times it is chiefly in Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri* that we can get a fuller and more sustained and constant expression of the Overhead inspiration in English poetry. Here we find the general Overhead atmosphere prevailing all through, now touching this level of it, now another, and sometimes two or three levels harmoniously mingled with one another; and then there is “everywhere a lift towards the mantra, culminating now and again in that sovereign speech itself”.² By way of illustration, K. D. Sethna points out to us, referring to the opening Canto of the poem that :

The higher mind inspiration passes directly through
The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone

(*Savitri*, one-volume edition, p. 3)

and mixes with that of the illumined mind in

An eye of the deity pierced through the dumb deeps

(*Ibid.*, p. 5)

and is replaced completely by it with

A slow miraculous gesture’s dim appeal

(*Ibid.*, p. 5)

The illumined mind works up to the intuition in the

1. *The Integral Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*: a commemorative symposium, op. cit., pp. 261-62.

2. *Ibid* cit., p. 262.

phrase about "gold panel and opalescent hinge" (Ibid., p. 6) fixed by the wandering hand of dawn-glamour, and blends exquisitely with the intuitive revelation in

A gate of dreams ajar on mystery's verge.

(Ibid., p. 6)

We may note also something of the ineffable amplitude that is the overmind's power in all the lines, a pervading influence which perhaps looms out most undeniably in another verse :

The abysm of the unbodied Infinite

(Ibid., p. 3)."¹

Thus, both in theory and actual practice, Sri Aurobindo tries to impress upon us how the dynamics of the various levels of the overhead inspiration can bring in "a greatness into poetry which could surpass the other levels of inspiration" and render it greater than the rest, even from the purely aesthetic point of view", not to speak of "the power of its substance". So far it has worked only indirectly and occasionally as an influence upon the mental, vital and subtle-physical planes and wherever it has done so, as Sri Aurobindo tries to indicate in some letters by examples taken from Shakespeare, Virgil, Milton, Wordsworth etc., it has already achieved results of an abiding felicity and beauty. "But its greatest work will be to express adequately and constantly what is now occasionally and inadequately some kind of utterance of the things above, the things beyond, the things behind the apparent world and its external or superficial happenings and phenomena. It would not only bring in the occult in its larger and deeper ranges but the truths of the spiritual heights, the spiritual depths, the spiritual intimacies and vastnesses as also the truths of the inner mind, the inner life, an inner or subtle-physical beauty and reality. It would bring in the concreteness, the authentic image, the inmost soul of identity and the heart of meaning of these things, so that it could never lack in beauty. If this could be achieved by one possessed, if not of a supreme, still of a sufficiently high and wide poetic genius, something new could be added to the domain of poetry and there would be no danger of the power of poetry beginning to fade, to fall into decadance, to fail us."²

1. Ibid., p.262.

2. *L3.*, p. 136.

This is precisely what he himself has done and proved beyond doubt through his magnificent epic *Savitri* which may be safely regarded as the gateway of the future poetry of the spirit. Also under his guidance we are now in a position,— thanks also to some of the wonderful new discoveries and researches of modern psychology, philosophy, Yoga and science, not to dismiss the fact or force of inspiration lightly as some superstitious brain-wave or frenzy of the man of the barbaric ages of history. On the contrary, we have now been enabled in various ways to recognise that it is some deeper or higher plane of consciousness which is always the originating source of inspiration. At any rate, Sri Aurobindo's writings have this power to do this for us, and his discovery and description of these higher, but no longer quite mysterious, planes of consciousness from which our inspiration generally comes, certainly constitute, as Prof. V. K. Gokak rightly says, "his most original contribution to the theory and psychology of art".¹ "The distinctions enunciated by him are based on his own experience and on ancient Indian thought and have a revelatory importance, not only for aesthetics, but also for Yogic psychology and metaphysics."²

And yet the one important note of cautious practical suggestion which K. D. Sethna does well to sound to us in this connection is not to be lightly taken particularly by those who would probably feel tempted to use these discoveries of the higher, the overhead planes of poetic inspiration as tools of literary criticism. The critic of overhead poetry, like its creator, has got to be sufficiently disciplined and moulded into a being, almost a citizen, of the kingdom of the Spirit before he can hope to perform his task well. As Mr. Sethna, a distinguished poet and literary critic himself, says

"It is not always easy to distinguish the overhead style or to get perfectly the drift of its suggestion. There must be as much as possible a stilling of ourselves, an indrawn hush ready to listen to the uncommon speech; and we must help the hush to absorb successfully that speech by repeatedly reading the poetry aloud, since it is primarily through the rhythm that the psychological state with which overhead verses are a-thrill echoes within us, quickening the eye to open wider and wider on spiritual

1. Op. cit. *Mother India*, December, 1953, p. 103

2. Ibid., p. 103.

secrecies and the brain to acquire a more and more true reflex of the transcendental that is the truth of things, waiting for manifestation.”¹

So much for the overhead sources of inspiration and creation. But these, as is quite evident, are not the only sources or planes of poetic inspiration. That is why Sri Aurobindo unmistakably and justly points out that the originating source of poetic inspiration “may be anywhere, the subtle-physical plane, the higher or lower vital itself, the dynamic or creative intelligence, the plane of dynamic vision, the psychic, the illumined mind—even, though this is the rarest - the Overmind”.²

Lyrical poetry comes out spontaneously from the higher or lower vital. Homer, according to Sri Aurobindo, is a supreme example of the genius who gets his inspiration from the subtle-physical plane, whereas Shakespeare’s inspiration comes usually from the creative vital plane, though there are lines in him here and there which have the subtle influence or touch of the overhead planes.³ The plane of the dynamic or creative intelligence is a mental plane with its vision, however, “moving on the wings of imagination akin to the intellect proper but lifted above it”.⁴ It is something above the level of the ordinary intellect but may be open to the influences of the Higher Mind knowledge and can acquire “a largeness of rhythm and sweep of the language which has a certain kinship to the manner natural to what is above”.⁵ When, for example, Milton starts his *Paradise Lost* with the lines

Of man’s first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree . . .

“he is obviously writing from the higher dynamic or

1. Op. cit., pp. 262-63.

2. L3., p. 4.

3. Such lines, for example, as the following :

“Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain.”

or “In the dark backward and abysm of Time.”

or Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
Seal up the shipboy’s eyes and rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge,”

“have the overhead touch in the substance, the rhythm and the feeling.”—Sri Aurobindo.

4. Ibid. p. 65.

5. Ibid., p. 65.

creative intelligence,¹ according to Sri Aurobindo. Milton may be, therefore, taken as a supreme example in English poetry of the genius of creative poetic intelligence. Indeed as Sri Aurobindo says, "... classical poetry is fundamentally a poetry of the poetic intelligence. But it may be suffused and modified by other influences—generally through some infiltration from the inner Mind which communicates some tinge of a higher afflatus to the poetic intelligence, sometimes through a direct uplifting".² About Dante also he says that "he writes from the poetic intelligence with a strong intuitive drive behind it".³

Then there is the plane of dynamic vision which "is a part of the inner Mind and perhaps should be called a province rather than a plane".⁴ And as regards the nature of this inner Mind source of inspiration, he says: "A certain spontaneous intensity of vision is usually there, but not of that large or rich sweep or power which belongs to the Illumined Mind."⁵ But though it "has not the wideness which is the characteristic of the planes that rise towards the Overmind",⁶ it is yet "more subtle and fine"⁷ than the Illumined Mind. Also, if the poet of the creative dynamic vision or inner mind makes an effort he can open to the spiritual realisations of the Higher Mind, but usually he does not possess this capacity or power. However, the poetry of the inner mind is "a thing to be felt rather than mentally definable"⁸ and, therefore, says Sri Aurobindo, to fix invariable characteristic for it "is not easy or even possible".⁹ It is much too subtle and fine for any neat intellectual definition or formulation.

Sri Aurobindo also makes a subtle distinction between the inner mind, mystic mind and intuitive mind. "The intuitive mind, strictly speaking, stretches from the Intuition proper down to the intuitivised inner mind—it is, therefore, at once an overhead power and a mental intelligence power. All depends on the amount, intensity,

1. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

3. *L.L.Y.* p. 102.

4. *L3.* p., 64

5. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

quality of the intuition and how far it is mixed with mind or is pure. The inner mind is not necessarily intuitive, though it can easily become so. The mystic mind is turned towards the occult and spiritual, but the inner mind can act without direct reference to the occult and spiritual, it can act in the same field and in the same material as the ordinary mind, only with a larger and deeper power, range and light and in greater unison with the Universal Mind; it can open also more easily to what is within and what is above. Intuitive intelligence, mystic mind, inner mind intelligence are all part of the inner mind operations."¹

A Poet's Stammer^a by K. D. Sethna was commented upon thus by Sri Aurobindo to illustrate the various degrees or kinds of the poetry of the intuitive mind :

"...it is certainly the inner mind that has transformed the idea of stammering into a symbol of inner phenomena and into that operation a certain strain of mystic mind enters, but what is prominent is the intuitive inspiration throughout. It blends with the intuitive poetic intelligence in the first stanza, gets touched by the overhead intuition in the second, gets full of it in the third and again rises rapidly to that in the two last lines of the fourth stanza. That is what I call poetry of the intuitive mind."³

Then there is what he calls the psychic inspiration which is another notable aesthetic and spiritual discovery

1. Ibid., p. 71.

2. My dream is spoken

As if by sound

Where tremulously broken

Some vow profound.

A timeless hush

Draws ever back

The winging music-rush

Upon thought's track

Though syllables sweep

Like golden birds,

Far lonelihoods of sleep

Dwindle my words.

Beyond life's clamour,

A mystery mars

Speech-light to a myriad stammer

Of flickering stars—

3. Ibid., pp. 71-72.

by him. It arises like the psychic fire¹ "in the deeper heart and from there is lighted in the mind, the vital and the physical body. In the mind (it) creates a light of intuitive perception and discrimination which sees at once what is the true vision or idea and the wrong vision or idea, the true feeling and the wrong feeling, the true movement and the wrong movement. In the vital it is kindled as a fire of right emotion and a kind of intuitive feeling, a sort of tact which makes for the right impulse.... In the body it initiates a similar but still more automatic correct response to the things of the physical life, sensation, body experience".² It "usually expresses itself through its instruments—mental, vital, physical—putting as much of its own stamp on them as possible. But it can seldom put on them the full psychic stamp—until it comes out and takes over the direct government of the nature. It can then receive and express all the spiritual realisations".³

Now the nature of its expression or action is different from that of the overhead planes, for it has "less of greatness, power, wideness", and "more of sweetness, delicate beauty, beauty of emotion also, fine subtlety of true perception, an intimate language etc.—Arnold's expression 'sweetness and light' can very well be applied to the psychic as the kernel of its nature. The spiritual planes, when they take up these, give them a wider utterance, powerful audacity, strength and space".⁴ Shelley's poem beginning with "I can give not what men call love" is, according to him, "perhaps the example of the psychic inspiration in English poetry".⁵ On the other hand, in the following stanza from his "Skylark" poem :

We look before and after
And pine for what is not :
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought

"it is the mind and the heart, the vital emotion, working

1. The lines already quoted on page 186 (footnote) from Arnold's poem, *Morality*, may provide a fairly good instance of it.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

at their highest pitch under the stress of a psychic inspiration".¹

For an example of the combination of the psychic and the illumined mind powers, Sri Aurobindo quotes the following lines of K. D. Sethna :

"If Thou desirest my weak self to outgrow
Its mortal longings, lean down from above,
Temper the unborn Light no thought can trace,
Suffuse my mood with a familiar glow.
For 'tis with mouth of clay I supplicate :
Speak to me heart to heart words intimate,
And all Thy formless glory turn to love
And mould Thy love into a human face."²

There are, then, also dream inspirations coming from the subconscious, but Sri Aurobindo does not attach much importance to them. "...it is rare", he says, "that these are of any value".³ The creations of the subconscious are generally liable to be "incoherent and lacking in any sense."⁴ It is, therefore, risky for a poet to rely upon such an inspiration. In this connection it is interesting to note the remarks which he made on Surrealist poetry, which is mostly a poetry based on the dream-consciousness. Apparently, he says, "surrealism is part of an increasing attempt of the European mind to escape from the surface consciousness (in poetry as well as in painting and in thought) and grope after a deeper truth of things which is not on the surface. The dream-consciousness as it is called—meaning not merely what we see in dreams, but the inner consciousness in which we get into contact with deeper worlds which underlie, influence and to some extent explain much in our lives, what the psychologists call the subliminal or the subconscious (the latter a very ambiguous phrase)—offers the first road of escape and the Surrealists seem to be trying to force it".⁵ His impression about their creation is, therefore, not happy, and he feels that in them "there is much fumbling and that more often it is certain obscure and not always very safe layers that are tapped".⁶ That,

1. Ibid., p. 115.

2. Quoted in *L.L.T.*, op. cit., p. 29.

3. *L3.*, p. 62.

4. Ibid., p. 62.

5. Ibid., pp. 234-235.

6. Ibid., p. 235.

to his mind, "accounts for the note of diabolism that comes in Baudelaire, in Rimbaud also, . . . and certain ugly elements in English surrealist poetry and painting".* To him obscurity and unintelligibility which are usually the characteristics of such poetry, "are not the essence of any poetry and except for unconscious or semi-conscious humorists like the Dadaists cannot be its aim or principle".¹ Of course, if a poetry is a "true dream-poetry" and not just a fake and superficial one, it "has and must always have a meaning and a coherence".² But then "it may very well be obscure or seem meaningless to those who take their stand on the surface or "waking" mind and accept only its links and logic".³ It is only by means of "an inner sense" that "a sequence, a logic, a design" can be perceived in true dream-poetry which, he is prepared to admit, "is usually full of images, visions, symbols that seek to strike at things too deep for the ordinary means of expression".⁴ But then the trouble is that usually "the surrealist dream-experiences are flat, physical and 'subconscious' vital dream layers which are the strata nearest to the surface".⁵ And the subconscious belt is "chaotic in its dream sequences. . . its transcriptions are fantastic and often mixed, continuing a jumble of different elements: some play with impressions from the past, some translate outward touches pressing on the sleep-mind; most are fragments from successive dream experiences that are not really part of the connected experience - as if a gramophone record were to be made up of snatches of different songs all jumbled together".⁶

However, there is a redeeming aspect of dream-inspiration, too, and Sri Aurobindo has no hesitation in conceding that "dream also can be made a material for poetry".⁷ But "everyone who has dreams or has visions or has flow of images cannot by that fact be a poet, a dreamer; one must have the poetic faculty and some training. . . what is possible. . . is that by going

* Ibid., p. 235.

1. Ibid., p. 235.

2. Ibid., p. 235.

3. Ibid., p. 235.

4. Ibid., p. 236.

5. Ibid., p. 237.

6. Ibid., p. 258.

7. Ibid., p. 240.

into inner (what is usually called the subliminal) consciousness - this is not really subconscious but a veiled or occult consciousness or getting somehow into contact with it, one not originally a poet can awake to poetic inspiration and power.... Mere recording of dreams or images or even visions could never be sufficient, unless it is a poetic inspiration that records them with the right use of words and rhythm bringing out their poetic substance.... So much I can concede to the surrealist theory; but if they say on that basis that all can with a little training turn themselves into poets well, one needs a little more proof before one can accept so wide a statement".¹

These, therefore, are, according to Sri Aurobindo, the poet-seer, some of the distinctive planes of consciousness from which the poet draws or may draw his inspiration with the results attendant upon the particular level with which he succeeds in establishing his contact at the time of creation and composition. 'There is a fairly vast variety here for the poets to choose from, and yet, in the ultimate analysis, it is not the poet himself who can deliberately determine his choice but the choice is somehow made for him by this mysterious power of inspiration itself, whether it flows through some kind of a "subliminal upsurge or supraliminal downpour".' Nor should we omit to mention here that much of this description, as pointed out by Sri Aurobindo himself, is not immediately likely to be intelligible to, and clearly identifiable by, the ordinary reader of poetry unless it is with "the right intuitive keenness and receptivity", collecting, as best as possible, all his mental, emotional and imaginative powers into the deep silence of the spirit, that he tries to feel and perceive it. Most of us, alas! depend too much yet upon the intellect, the logical, scientific reasoning to unravel the mysteries of poetic inspiration or the secrets of poetic creation, but our reasoning, however brilliant and acute, can at best be a blind and impotent guide in these matters. Not until we have kindled, as Arnold says, "the fire which in the heart resides" can we acquire that power of "insight" which alone is an effective ally in these subtle adventures.

1. Ibid., pp. 240-41.

2. K. D. Sethna's article on "Notes on poetic inspiration", *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, No. 7, 1948, p. 136.

APPENDIX

“...we perceive a graduality of ascent, a communication with a more and more deep and immense light and power from above, a scale of intensities which can be regarded as so many stairs in the ascension of Mind or in a descent into Mind from That which is beyond it. We are aware of a sealike downpour of masses of a spontaneous knowledge which assumes the nature of Thought but has a different character from the process of thought to which we are accustomed; for there is nothing here of seeking, no trace of mental construction, no labour of speculation of difficult discovery; it is an automatic and spontaneous knowledge from a Higher Mind that seems to be in possession of Truth and not in search of hidden and withheld realities. One observes that this Thought is much more capable than the mind of including at once a mass of knowledge in a single view; it has a cosmic character, not the stamp of an individual thinking. Beyond this Truth-Thought we can distinguish a greater illumination instinct with an increased power and intensity and driving force, a luminosity of the nature of Truth-Sight with thought formulation as a minor and dependent activity. If we accept the Vedic image of the Sun of Truth,—an image which in the experience becomes a reality,—we may compare the action of the Higher Mind to a composed and steady sunshine, the energy of the Illumined Mind beyond it to an outpouring of massive lightnings of flaming sun-stuff. Still beyond can be met a yet greater power of the Truth-Force, an intimate and exact Truth-vision, Truth-thought, Truth-sense, Truth-feeling, Truth-action, to which we can give in a special sense the name of Intuition; for though we have applied that word for want of a better to any supra-intellectual direct way of knowing, yet what we actually know as intuition is only one special movement of self-existent knowledge. This new range is its origin; it imparts to our intuitions something of its own distinct character and is very clearly an intermediary of a greater Truth-Light with which our mind cannot directly communicate. At the source of this Intuition we discover a superconscient cosmic Mind in direct contact with the Supramental Truth-Consciousness, an original intensity determinant of all

movements below it and all mental energies,—not Mind as we know it, but an Overmind that covers as with the wide wings of some creative oversoul this whole lower hemisphere of Knowledge-Ignorance, links it with the greater Truth-Consciousness while yet at the same time with its brilliant golden Lid it veils the face of the greater Truth from our sight, intervening with its flood of infinite possibilities as at once an obstacle and a passage in our seeking of the spiritual law of our existence, its highest aim, its secret Reality.”

—*The Life Divine*, American Edition, pp. 254-55

Chapter 8

THE PROCESS OF POETIC CREATION

Sri Aurobindo, as we have seen in the last chapter, is a believer in the power of inspiration not merely as a theory but a fact of both personal and general creative experience. And though a mysterious, uncertain, variable and essentially unanalysable power from the intellectual point of view, for it is, as he says, a thing to be felt and inwardly perceived and realised rather than mentally understood and grasped, it has been nevertheless explored and examined and even, one may say, precisely categorised and classified by him so that we may have as adequate a knowledge of its various planes and levels and their distinguishing features as it is humanly possible at present to acquire. In the last chapter an attempt was made to describe some of these planes as indicated by him. Whether or no we are yet ready to understand all of them, particularly the various levels of the Overhead inspiration such as the Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuitive Mind, Overmind and their various combinations and interminglings, we cannot fail to admit that it is something of a significantly epoch-making work he has done in the field of aesthetics, and bequeathed a whole world of new categories and terms to the aesthetic domains for the use of not only the artists and critics but also the psychologists and metaphysicians of the future.

When we, next, turn to the process of poetic creation and read his views on it, mostly scattered in a number of letters, we find once again that it is something of a revelation which he opens out to us. And once again it is not so much of a theory that he seeks to establish before us, pitted against other theories which may be there in the field claiming our attention. Some of the outstanding publications on the creative process, referred to in the last chapter, are there to give us a fairly adequate idea of the way in which this question has been regarded and this mystery of poetic creation explored in the West in recent times. The Freudian and Jungian psychological researches as well as the Marxist sociological and materialistic theories have been some of the leading guides or lights there and most poets, artists, literary

critics and aesthetic theorists of recent times have chiefly drawn upon them. And yet one does not feel quite satisfied with their discoveries and theories. It appears that they are still on the fringe of the problem, for they have not yet delved into the deeper depths or scaled the overhead heights of the human consciousness. The creation of poetry like every other human creation is integrally connected with the level of consciousness attained by man, and as the recent Western aesthetic theories are mostly concerned with the lower consciousness of man or his ordinary physical-vital-mental consciousness only, they can but help us understand something of the mystery of the ordinary, the vital and mental, particularly the lower vital and mental, products only of the creative genius: they are altogether inadequate to explain the whence and wherefore of some of the greatest and noblest artistic and poetical works. And as to such creations as the Veda, the Upanishads, the Gita, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata, or the Bible, and the Quoran, they can only mislead us and even pervert our critical approach and understanding. When, however, we read Sri Aurobindo's views on this point we not only breathe a purer and cleaner air of understanding and feel greater aesthetic and critical satisfaction but also find ourselves on surer and more revealing and illuminated grounds of observation from which to proceed on the right and progressively ascending lines. On the contrary, the Freudians and the Marxists can ultimately lead us but to a blind alley.

With an almost scientific accuracy of a general operative law he tells us that true poetry "comes always from some subtle plane through the creative vital and uses the outer mind and other external instruments for transmission only".¹ There are, thus, broadly speaking, "three elements, the original source of inspiration, the vital force of creative beauty which gives its substance and impetus and determines the form, and the transmitting outer consciousness of the poet".² "The most genuine and perfect poetry", he continues, "is written when the original source is able to throw its inspiration pure and unaltered into the vital and there it takes its true native form and power of speech exactly reproducing the inspiration, while the outer consciousness is entirely

1. *L3.*, p. 3.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

passive and transmits without alteration what it receives. When the vital is too active and gives too much of its own initiative or a translation into more or less turbid vital stuff, the poetry remains powerful but is inferior in quality and less authentic. Finally, if the outer consciousness is too lethargic and blocks, or too active and makes its own version, then you have the poetry that fails. It is also the interference of these two parts either by obstruction or by too great an activity of their own or by both together that causes the labour of writing. There would be no difficulty if the inspiration came through without obstruction or interference in a pure transcription—and that is what happens in a poet's highest or freest moments when he writes not at all out of his own external human mind but by inspiration, as the mouthpiece of the gods."¹

Of the three elements mentioned above, the most important, therefore, is the original source of inspiration which, as Sri Aurobindo says, can come through "without obstruction or interference in a pure transcription". As a matter of fact, as he says in another letter, "a poem may pre-exist in the timeless as all creation pre-exists there or else in some plane where the past, present and future exist together. But it is not necessary to presuppose anything of the kind to explain the phenomena of inspiration. All is here a matter of formation or creation. By the contact with the source of inspiration, the creative Power, at one level or another, and the human instrument, receptacle or channel get into contact. That is the essential point, all the rest depends upon the individual case. If the substance, rhythm, form, words come down all together ready formed from the plane of poetic creation, that is the perfect type of inspiration; it may give its own spontaneous gift or it may give something which corresponds to the idea or the aspiration of the poet, but in either case the human being is only a channel or receptacle, although he feels the joy of the creation and the joy of the *avesh*, *enthousiasmos*, elation of the inrush and the passage".²

Thus the best creator of poetry, according to Sri Aurobindo, is one who not only considers himself to be merely "a channel or receptacle" of the creative Power, but by this pure habit or condition of passivity

1. Ibid., pp. 3-4.

2. *L.L.T.*, op. cit., p. 89.

or surrender of his ordinary self is able to establish contact with that Power at "the original source of inspiration" itself where it is said the whole poem may exist ready-made and he has only to allow it to come through his perfectly surrendered creative vital, "pure and unaltered". This is what happens when the poet is so completely possessed by the creative Power that he is said to write "not at all out of his external human mind but by inspiration", when his "outer consciousness is entirely passive and transmits without alteration what it receives". At such moments he hardly writes like a human poet but becomes the "mouthpiece of the gods". But it is obvious that such a perfect creation happens rarely. Often enough what happens when the poet is working under the influence of inspiration is that "the creative source sends down the substance or stuff, the force and the idea, but the language, the rhythm etc. are found somewhere in the instrument".¹ That is to say, it is the poet himself who through the external means of expression like language, rhythm, etc. "has to find the human transcription of something that is there in diviner essence above".² There is no doubt "an illumination or excitement" working within him or upon him from above but there is also "a conscious labour of creation swift or slow, hampered or facile"⁴ as the case may be, a good deal depending, of course, upon the nature and power of the instrument. In such cases "something of the language may be supplied by the mind or vital, something may break through from somewhere behind the veil, from whatever source gets into touch with the transcribing mind in the liberating or stimulating excitement or uplifting of the consciousness".⁵ It is also possible that "a line or lines may come through from some plane and the poet excited to creation may build around them constructing his material or getting it from any source he can tap".⁶ Indeed, there may be several possibilities of this nature. Also, quite different results are likely to happen if the original source of inspiration does not flow from above the mental or ordinary consciousness but

1. Ibid., pp. 89-90.

2. Ibid., p. 90.

3. Ibid., p. 90.

4. Ibid., p. 90.

5. Ibid., p. 90.

6. Ibid., p. 90.

gets working "from somewhere within on the ordinary levels, some inner mind, emotional, vital etc. which the mind practised in poetical technique works out according to its habitual capacity".¹ And here again quite a number of variations are possible, though in a different way and with different results.

In this connection it is interesting to note that Sri Aurobindo considers the intellect or the mental activity which is given such a large importance in Western aesthetics to be a rather dangerous instrument for the poet. Even most of the creative artists in Europe seem to think that for the actual task of composition or execution the use of the mind is a necessity. Without the exercise of the faculty of mental judgment and discrimination, how can they chop and change, select and reject, refine and discipline in order to achieve perfection of expression? As the process of the selection of the right means of expression, and rejection of the wrong ones, as the whole act of disciplining and refining the experience into a perfect form of expression is a conscious activity, this can be best done by the mind, the intellect itself which is the most conscious instrument or faculty we possess. Such is the substance of their argument for the deliberate use of the mental power and intellectual judgment in works of art. In any case, those who consider themselves to be classicists find it almost impossible to reject the use of the intellect in their artistic creation.² But for Sri Aurobindo, on the other hand, whose idea of poetic creation is, as we have seen above, that the poet should make himself as completely passive an instrument as possible for the transmission of the original source of inspiration which itself has the power to create its own true native form and substance of speech while passing through the creative vital and should be, therefore, allowed by the poet to use his outer mind and other external instruments for transmission only, the conscious or active use of the intellect can only prove to be an obstacle in perfect poetic creation. We are reminded here of Housman's statement that "the intellect is not the fountain of poetry. . . . it may actually hinder its produc-

1. Ibid., p. 90.

2. According to Sri Aurobindo, however, it is the pseudo-classical or lower kind of classical art and literature which depends upon the faculty of intellect for achieving perfection, for real classical art "works by a large vision and inspiration, not by the process of the intellect." (*The Human Cycle*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, p. 172)

tion....”¹ Sri Aurobindo’s view, too, is that this intellect being “an absurdly over-active part of the nature always thinks that nothing can be well done unless it puts its finger into the pie and therefore it instinctively interferes with the inspiration, blocks half or more than half of it and labours to substitute its own inferior and toilsome productions for the true speech and rhythm that ought to have come”.² As such, what happens in the case of the poet who allows his intellect or power of judgment to choose the words, rhythms, images etc. is that he “labours in anguish to get the one true word, the authentic rhythm, the real divine substance of what he has to say, while all the time it is waiting complete and ready behind, but is not allowed transmission by some part of the transmitting agency which prefers to try to translate and is not willing merely to receive and transcribe”.³ This happens particularly “when the brain is at work trying to fashion out of itself or to give its own version of what the higher sources are trying to pour down”.⁴

There is no doubt, says Sri Aurobindo, that an artist should have in the very act of creation “the guidance of an inner power of discrimination”⁵ which has the inherent capacity for “constantly selecting and rejecting in accordance with a principle of truth and beauty which remains always faithful to a harmony, a proportion, an intimate relation of the form to the idea”.⁶ But this “inner power of discrimination” is not to be confused with, as it is often done in Western literary criticism or aesthetics, with the discrimination of the “critical intellect”. With all the emphasis which he can command, Sri Aurobindo, therefore, tells us that “the discrimination which works in the creator is....not an intellectual self-criticism or an obedience to rule imposed on him from outside by any intellectual canons, but itself creative, intuitive, a part of the vision, involved in and inseparable from the act of creation”.^{7*} For

1. *The Name and Nature of Poetry*.

2. *L3*, p. 5.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

5. *The Human Cycle*, American Edn., 1950, p. 155.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

* Coleridge, one of the best literary critics not only in English but all European

"it comes as part of that influx of power and light from above which by its divine enthusiasm lifts the faculties into their intense suprarational working".¹ The fundamental truth being so, the artist who attempts to correct, revise or even recast his work by "rule and intellectual process"² really uses "a false or at any rate an inferior method and cannot do his best. He ought rather to call to his aid the intuitive critical vision and embody it in a fresh act of inspired creation or re-creation after bringing himself back by its means into harmony with the light and law of his original creative intuition."³ In any case, Sri Aurobindo is emphatic on the point that "the critical intellect has no direct or independent part in the means of the inspired creator of beauty".⁴

And yet it is not a fact that Sri Aurobindo would have the poets sit idle until they get the full flow of inspiration from above or within. The instruments of work have got to be kept ready so that when the call comes from above they are in a position to give the best response. In any case, he is not prepared, in spite of being a full believer in the creative power of inspiration, to subscribe wholly to D.H. Lawrence's view that "one

literature, also hunts at this basic truth when he says, while defending the creative genius of Shakespeare, that "genius cannot be lawless," inasmuch as it possessed inherently "the power of acting creatively under laws of its own origination"—*Coleridge's Literary Criticism*: an anthology with an introduction by J. W. Mackail, O.U.P., reprinted, 1949, p. 185.

He makes this point all the more explicit when he distinguishes between what he calls the "mechanic" and the "organic" forms. As he says: "The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material. . . . The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such as the life is, such is the form. Nature, the prime genial artist, inexhaustible in diverse powers, is equally inexhaustible in forms. . . ." (Ibid., p. 186).

It is quite evident that such a thing is not possible if the artist concerned depends too much, as Sri Aurobindo says, upon his critical intellect and "an obedience to rules imposed upon him from outside" and too little upon "the intuitive critical vision", "involved in and inseparable from the act of creation". He must work like "Nature, the prime genial artist, inexhaustible in diverse powers, . . . equally inexhaustible in forms".

1. Ibid., pp. 155-56.

2. Ibid., p. 156.

3. Ibid., p. 156.

4. Ibid., p. 156.

can only write creative stuff when it comes otherwise it is not much good". To him this statement of Lawrence is no doubt "true in principle" but he cannot ignore the fact, particularly in view of the examples of the regular and constant toil of such great poets as Virgil and Milton, that "in practice most poets have to sustain the inspiration by industry".¹ Also, there is the larger fact that there are few poets who "can keep for a very long time a sustained level of the highest inspiration."² As he says, "the best poetry does not usually come by streams except in the poets of a supreme greatness though there may be in others than the greatest long-continued wingings at a considerable height. The very best comes by intermittent drops, though sometimes three or four gleaming drops at a time. Even in the greatest poets, even in those with the most opulent flow of riches like Shakespeare, the very best is comparatively rare".³

The very best is comparatively rare and comes by intermittent drops mainly because the contact with the inner or higher planes where poems already exist, complete and readymade, is intermittent and uncertain. Often it so happens that the whole poem does not come from one single plane of consciousness or inspiration; on the contrary, the various parts of it hail from quite different planes. Why it happens like this is explained by Sri Aurobindo :

"If the parts of a poem come from different planes, it is because one starts from some high plane but the connecting consciousness cannot receive uninterruptedly from there and as soon as it flickers or wavers it comes down to a lower, perhaps without noticing it, or the lower comes in to supply the continuation of the flow, or, on the contrary, the consciousness starts from a lower plane and is lifted in the *avesh** perhaps occasionally, perhaps more continuously higher for a time or else the higher force attracted by the creative will breaks through or touches or catches up the less excited inspiration towards or into itself."⁴

This process of the lifting up of the consciousness of a lower plane by the creative force of the higher planes usually happens on the overhead planes. As Sri

1. *L3.*, p. 9.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

* i.e., elation of the creative art.

4. *L.L.T.*, op. cit., p. 90.

Aurobindo says, "...the Overmind, for instance, is the ultimate source of intuition, illumination or heightened power of the planes immediately below it. It can lift them up into its own greater intensity or give out of its intensity to them or touch or combine their powers together with something of its own greater power—or they can receive or draw something from it or from each other."¹ This kind of intermixing process can also happen on the lower planes beginning from the mental. But "the working is not the same, for the different powers here stand more on a footing of equality whether they stand apart from each other, each working in its own right, or cooperate".²

It may be stated in this connection that an interesting question was put to Sri Aurobindo by one of his disciples, with regard to the language used by the creative power of inspiration: "Are all the innumerable languages of earth spoken in the higher planes or do the latter possess merely modes or states of consciousness?"³ To this Sri Aurobindo's reply was equally interesting and revealing:

"As for the language, the tongue in which the poem comes or the whole lines from above, that offers no real difficulty. It all depends on the contact between the creative Power and the instrument or channel; the Power will naturally choose the language of the instrument or channel, that to which it is accustomed and can, therefore, readily hear and receive. The Power itself is not limited and can use any language, but although it is possible for things to come through in a language unknown or ill-known—I have seen several instances of the former it is not a usual case, since the *sanskaras* of the mind, its habit of action and conception would normally obstruct any such unprepared receptiveness; only a strong mediumistic faculty might be unaffected by this difficulty. These things, however, are obviously exceptional, abnormal or supernormal phenomena."⁴

Such, in brief, is Sri Aurobindo's theory of the process of poetic creation. It is obviously based upon a subtle and profound psychological as well as spiritual experience and realisation. This is why it goes to the very roots

1. Ibid., p. 90.

2. Ibid., pp. 90-91.

3. Ibid., p. 89.

4. Ibid., p. 90.

of the matter and lays bare to our vision the very fountain-heads of poetic creation. On the other hand, when we go through the views expressed by the leading English poets and critics on the subject,¹ we hardly find that they concern themselves with the psychological and spiritual origins of the process, which lie hidden behind the actual form of the poem. They are usually preoccupied with the constituent limbs and features of poetry and, therefore, skim the surface only of poetic creation. Of course, we cannot say that their analysis becomes superficial on this account. What we may say is that instead of going to the soul of poetic creation, they get confined mostly to the body of it. But here and there we find views which come nearer the truths as revealed by Sri Aurobindo. Among the earlier English critics, Thomas Lodge, Sir Philip Sidney and G. Puttenham appear to have divined that poetry is fundamentally a thing of inspiration and comes to the poet from above "...poetry", says Lodge, for example, "cometh from above, from a heavenly seat of glorious God, unto an excellent creature man....it cometh not by exercise of play-making, neither insertion of gauds, but from nature and from above....and whereas the poets were said to call for the Muse's help, their meaning was no other....but to call for heavenly inspiration from above to direct their endeavours....when their matter is most heavenly their style is most lofty".² The obvious implication here is that when the poet does not try to interfere with the working of inspiration upon him from above, his creation is the best. Even Ben Jonson who like all classicists laid much stress upon "rules", "exercise", study, imitation, etc., was not quite ignorant of the invisible presence of this higher creative Power or source when he said that poetry uttered "somewhat above a mortal mouth".³ "Then it riseth higher, as by a divine instinct, when it contemns common and known conceptions.... Then it gets aloft and flies away with his rider, whither before it was doubtful to ascend.... This the poets understand by their *Helicon*, *Pegasus* or *Parnassus*....hence it is that the coming up of good poets....

1. A very good collection of such views by writers including the moderns is to be found in the opening chapter, entitled the "Theory of Poetic Creation", of R. P. Cowl's *Theory of Poetry in England*, op. cit.

2. Quoted in Cowl's book, op. cit., pp. 2-3.

3. Ibid., p. 5.

is so thin and rare among us....”¹ But from about the later half of the 17th century until the time of the Romantics we find that inspiration comes to be regarded as “a dangerous word”² and its working, too, is ridiculed and condemned by saying that it is “a spiritual fit, derived from the ancient ethnic poets, who then, as they were priests, were statesmen too, and probably loved dominion; and as their well dissembling of inspiration begot them reverence then equal to that which was paid to laws, so these who now profess the same fury may perhaps by such authentic example, pretend authority over the people....”³ It is Hobbes, however, who is the strongest critic of the theory of inspiration during this period and thinks of it as a foolish and unreasonable custom coming of yore, “by which a man, enabled to speak wisely from the principles of nature and his own meditation, loves rather to be thought to speak by inspiration, like a bagpipe”⁴ And in order to break such a foolish “bagpipe” to pieces he set down his own theory of poetic creation thus: “Time and Education begets experience; Experience begets memory; Memory begets judgment and fancy; Judgment begets the strength and structure, and Fancy begets the ornaments of a poem. The ancients therefore fabled not absurdly in making memory the mother of the Muses.”⁵ The critical judgment of Hobbes, therefore, ascribed the source of poetic creation to memory. Another rational critic of the period, Sri William Temple, sought to explain this ancient mystery of inspiration by saying that it was nothing more than “a certain noble and vital heat of temper....specially for the brain”.⁶

However, we find that the great Romantic poet and critic, Wordsworth, gave a quite deeper meaning to the faculty of memory, stressed so much by Hobbes, and to the theory of the vital brain-energy of William Temple when he made the famous statement: “... poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears and an emotion,

1. Ibid., pp. 5-6.

2. Davenant: *Preface to Gondibert*, 1650.

3. Quoted in Cowl's book, op. cit., p. 8.

4. Ibid., p. 10.

5. Ibid., pp. 10-11.

6. Ibid., pp. 16-17.

kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on...."¹ This was quite a big advance on previous theories of the way poetry was born, inasmuch as it sought to relate the poetic process to some of the deeper psychological truths of human nature and consciousness. And when Coleridge came out with his theory of the part played by Imagination and Fancy in poetic composition a further stride was taken in the psychological understanding of the poetic phenomenon. The distinction between these two creative faculties of the poet is admirably brought out by him thus: "How excellently the German *Einbildungskraft* expresses this prime and loftiest faculty, the power of co-adunation, the faculty that forms the many into one—In-cins-bildung! Eisenoplasy or eisenoplastic power, is contradistinguished from fantasy, or the mirrorment,—either catoptric or metoptric—repeating simply, or by transposition and, again involuntary (fantasy) as in dreams, or by an act of the Will".²

Here, it is just possible, one may say—as, for example, even such a finely endowed critic as J.W. Mackail does regarding most of the philosophical-critical passages of Coleridge—that "it is rhetoric, not criticism....barren word-play".³ But the fact is that Coleridge is putting forward a very profound truth about the way a poet truly creates, and at the same time, effectively showing up the inadequacy of, and demolishing as well, the theory of Memory and Fancy which Hobbes had put forward before, with all the authority of his philosophical and literary scholarship. It is by virtue of "Eisenoplasy" or "esemplastic power" which, in common parlance, is the faculty of Imagination, and not "fantasy" or fancy that the poet, according to Coleridge, really creates. The distinction between Fancy and Imagination, therefore, as also the distinction between what he called the primary and secondary Imagination was, it is probable, set forth by him—unfortunately in his typical cryptic and compressed style—in order to give a fitting

1. Ibid., pp. 28-29.

2. Ibid., p. 38.

3. Mackail: *Coleridge's Literary Criticism*, Oxford University Press, Reprinted, 1949. Introduction, p. ix.

reply to Hobbes, Locke and Hartley. Professor Basil Willey has made Coleridge's views on this important classical theory explicit enough.

"What of the distinction", Prof. Willey asks, "between the two kinds of Imagination, the Primary and the Secondary?" And he replies, "I fear that some readers are misled by the oracular sublimity of Coleridge's definition of the former: 'The Primary Imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.'"

"This is not to be dismissed as metaphysical babble; a weight of thought, indeed a whole philosophy lies beneath each phrase. Coleridge is here summarising the great struggle and victory of his life—his triumph over the old tradition of Locke and Hartley, which had assumed that the mind in perception was wholly passive, 'a lazy looker-on on an external world'.... The mind, he now teaches, works actively in the mere act of perception; it knows its objects not by passive reception, but by its own energy and under its own necessary forms; indeed, it knows not mere objects as such, but itself in the objects....¹

"In speaking, thus, of the Primary Imagination, then, Coleridge is affirming that the mind is essentially and inveterately creative: 'we receive but what we give', and in the commonest everyday acts of perception we are making our own world. We make it, indeed, not *ex nihilo*, but out of the influxes proceeding from Nature, or as Coleridge preferred to say 'the infinite I AM'. Whatever we perceive is what we have made in response to these stimuli; perception is an activity of the mind, not a merely mechanical registering of impressions. However (and this is now the point to be emphasised), it is the Secondary Imagination, not the Primary, which he proceeds to contrast with Fancy, it is the Secondary Imagination which is at work in the making of poetry. For how does it operate?

"It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate.... it struggles to idealise and unify. It is essentially *vital* even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed

1. Coleridge makes this point all the more explicit in one of his letters: "If the mind be not *passive*, if it be indeed made in God's Image, and that, too, in the sublimest sense, the *Image of the Creator*, there is ground for suspicion that any system built on the passiveness of the mind must be false, as a system."—Letters, Vol. I, p. 352.

and dead.¹

"Here speaks the seer, the poet and the romantic; not content with the automatic 'poetry' which we all create, and which we call the world of everyday appearances; he would transcend this for a vision more intense, more true, than is afforded by the light of common day....

"If we ask, then, what it is which the Secondary Imagination must 'dissolve, diffuse and dissipate', the answer is....it is the 'inanimate cold world' of the Primary Imagination all that is allowed to the daily, prosaic consciousness of average humanity, and to poets themselves when power deserts them....this desire (as Wordsworth expresses it)

"for something loftier, more adorned
Than is the common aspect, daily garb
Of human life." (*The Prelude*, Book V, lines 575-77)

is no mere romantic escapism, though it may sometimes take that form; it is the originating impulse of poets of all times (including our own time), and not merely of poets, but of seers and saints and scientists as well....

"The Imagination, then (we may now drop the word 'secondary') is the mind in its highest state of creative insight and alertness; its acts are acts of growth...."²

"Fancy, on the contrary," says Coleridge, "has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word choice. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready-made from the law of association."³

There is no doubt that in so far as it involves acts of selection and arrangement - "that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word choice" - Fancy, as Basil Willey tells us, "is on a higher level than mere perception or mere memory. But it is below Imagination in that, instead of making all things new, it merely constructs patterns out of *ready-made* materials, 'fixities and definites.' It juxtaposes images, but does

1. *Biographia Literaria*, Everyman's Edition, 1930, pp. 159-160.

2. *Nineteenth Century Studies*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1955, pp. 13-16.

3. *Biographia Literaria*, op. cit., p. 160.

not *fuse* them into unity; its products are like mechanical mixtures (as of salt with iron filings), in which the ingredients, though close together, remain the same as when apart; whereas those of Imagination are like chemical compounds (say, of sodium and chlorine), in which the ingredients lose their separate identities in a new substance, composed of them indeed, but differing from them both".¹

At another place, Coleridge says that the images of Fancy "have no connection natural or moral, but are yoked together by the poet by means of some accidental coincidence".² On the other hand, in Imagination all the essential qualities of the images are made to interpenetrate; and "as the co-ordinating, shaping power" its function is "to see all things as one, and the one in all things".³

Thus if we put the matter a little philosophically we may say that according to Coleridge, the poetic power is the Secondary Imagination which is the Universal Being's creative faculty actively at work in the individual, co-existent with the individual conscious will; and it is when this secondary Imagination acts creatively on the objects of sensation which are the Primary Imagination repeated in the individual, that we get into touch with the original creativity projecting those objects within the Universal Consciousness. And it is then that we see everything as a symbol of the Infinite and thus participating, in our human way, in the significance of the Universe as it exists in the Supreme.

Then at one place Coleridge also says, "Forms exist before the substance out of which they are shaped."⁴ The idea of the pre-existence of poetic creation on some higher plane of the infinite is, as stated by Sri Aurobindo, thus clearly adumbrated in Coleridge's poetics as well. And Shelley says, "Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, 'I will compose poetry.' The greatest poet even cannot say it. . . ."⁵ Referring to the greatest poets of his own day, he asks whether it is not "an error

1. Basil Willey, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

2. *Table Talk*, June 23, 1834.

3. Basil Willey, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

4. Allsop's *Letters, Conversations and Recollections*, 1836, quoted in Cowl's book, p. 121.

5. *A Defence of Poetry*.

to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labour and study".¹ "Milton", he continues to argue, "conceived the *Paradise Lost* as a whole before he executed it in portions. We have his own authority also for the Muse having 'dictated' to him the 'unpremeditated song'.... a great statue or picture grows under the power of the artist as a child in the mother's womb; and the very mind which directs the hands in formation is incapable of accounting to itself for the origin, the gradations, or the media of the process."² Again, he also says about poetry, generally, "It acts in a divine and unapprehended manner beyond and above consciousness."³ In such statements he is in fact suggesting that the sources of poetic creation are somewhere above and not "subject to the control of the active powers of the mind". Shelley, too, therefore, relates the process of poetic creation to the working of some higher consciousness in the psychology of man, and thereby confirms Sri Aurobindo's experience of it.

There is also a significant passage in E.A. Poe's *The Poetic Principle* (1844): "The struggle to apprehend the supernal loveliness this struggle on the part of souls fittingly constituted, has given to the world all that which it (the world) has ever been enabled at once to understand and to *feel* as poetic."⁴ Poe's idea here that there is "the supernal loveliness" existing somewhere above the human consciousness, and that "souls fittingly constituted" struggle to "apprehend" it, or make "a wild effort to reach the beauty above"⁵ is a clear indication once again that in essence poetic creation has a subtler and deeper psychological motivation and process of a higher order than is within the reach of the human intellect. Robert Browning seems to be still more positive and precise about this point when he says, "He (i.e. the subjective poet), gifted like the objective poet with the fuller perception of nature and man, is impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below, as to the One above him, the supreme intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth an ultimate view ever aspired

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid.

3. *The World of Poetry*, op. cit., p. 109.

4. Quoted in Cowl's Book, op. cit., p. 40.

5. Ibid., p. 40.

to, if but partially attained, by the poet's own soul. Not what man sees, but what God sees—the Ideas of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand,—it is towards these that he struggles...and he digs where he stands, preferring to seek them in his own soul as the nearest reflex of that absolute mind, according to the intuitions of which he desires to perceive and speak. Such a poet...is rather a seer, accordingly, than a fashioner, and what he produces will be less a work than an effluence."¹ Here, too, the idea is clearly suggested that the whole process of poetic creation by the subjective poet who is not "a fashioner" like the objective poet but "a seer" lies in psychologically and spiritually reaching out to and establishing contact with the higher region above where, "the Ideas of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly in the Divine Hand" exist perennially. Also, it is the poet's soul alone, i.e. the most plastic instrument of the divine consciousness in man which is "the nearest reflex of that absolute mind, according to the intuitions of which he desires to perceive and speak".

There are some modern critics, too, who, like Sri Aurobindo, have the feeling that poetry or art is not 'created' so much as that it is brought down from a plane where it already exists, complete and ready for transmission. Marcel Proust, for example, says about a work of art in *Remembrance of Things Past*, "...we do not create it as we please...it pre-exists in us and we are compelled, as though it were by a law of nature, to discover it because it is at once hidden from us and necessary."² G.G. Coulton in his *Mediaeval Panorama* (1938) says about Dante, "...we feel not so much ...that he is creating, as that he stands by, removes a veil, and shows a truth pre-existent from all eternity and living to all eternity..."³ E. H. Gombrich says nearly the same thing about Michaelangelo in his *The Story of Art* (1950) that he "always tried to conceive his figures as lying hidden in the block of marble on which he was working. The task he set himself as a sculptor was merely to remove the stone which covered them".⁴ Clive Sansom, too, expresses this very view when he says :

1. *On the Poet, Objective and Subjective*, 1851, quoted in Cowl's book, op. cit., p. 41.

2. *The World of Poetry*, op. cit., p. 121.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

"It is as if the whole poem, form and all, already exists—whether in outer space or inner consciousness doesn't matter. The poet's job is to collect and bring down to earth before the already fading realisation of it is dispersed again."¹ Even what is known as the poet's craftsmanship, he says, "comes in, but to help in deciding whether one's view of the existing poem is correct, rather than to help in creating it. The poem, in fact, is there already. All one's faculties, including craftsmanship, are concentrated on extracting it intact".²

Thus we see that the essence of Sri Aurobindo's deeper psychological and spiritual perception of the way poetry is born is, to an appreciable extent, well adumbrated and confirmed in the views of not a few of the English critics, past and present. But mostly they are able to catch the essence only. The details of the whole process, the multiplicity of the planes from which not only the diviner essence of the inspiration but the very language, rhythm and other particulars of its form of expression come down to the well-attuned human receptacle, the intermingling of the various planes of consciousness and the consequent difference in the results and merits of the poetic achievement, the distinction between the overhead planes of inspiration and those existing from the mind downwards, the various parts of the same poem coming from different planes and the illuminating reasons given for such a phenomenon which is quite usual, the role of the creative vital, and the outer mind and other external instruments in the over-all process of poetic composition, the precise nature of the pre-existence of a poem, the precise qualification of the true poet as lying in his being merely a most plastic and faithful receptacle, the choice of the language of expression by the creative Power etc., all these things are given fairly elaborately, and precisely by Sri Aurobindo more than anybody else. His theory of poetic creation, provided it can be called just a theory, is, therefore, much more comprehensive and precise, subtle and profound, deeply psychological as well as spiritual, than we get elsewhere; and it reveals to us the very hidden fountain-heads and not merely the visible expanding bed of the outflowings of the dynamic creative powers of inspiration. And on the basis of what he has to give us on this point

1. Ibid., p. 120.

2 Ibid., p. 120.

we may be quite justified in saying that the process of what is usually known as poetic creation is, in fact, and more properly, but the process of poetic transmission through the fit human channel, and that all that the poet needs to do during the act of creation is to concentrate all one's faculties, including the one of craftsmanship or organisation on transmitting "the whole poem, form and all" intact from either the higher planes above or the psychic regions within, where it already exists, ready and complete. And even when the originating source is but the subtle-physical plane or the higher or lower vital or the creative intelligence, for this source, as Sri Aurobindo says, "may be anywhere", the best way in which the so-called creative poet can respond to it is to render himself a fit channel of transmission only without any let or hindrance from any part of himself. As he compendiously says in another letter, "Poetry is a question of the right concentrated silence or seeking somewhere in the mind with the right openness to the Word that is trying to express itself—for the Word is there ready to descend in those inner planes where all artistic forms take birth, but it is the transmitting mind that must change and become a perfect channel and not an obstacle."¹ At the same time, although the poet plays his role best by being only a channel or receptacle, he is not quite deprived of "the joy of the creation and the joy of the *avesh*, *enthousiasmos*, elation of the inrush and the passage".

There is a passage towards the end of *The Future Poetry* where Sri Aurobindo states the psychological phenomenon of poetic inspiration in as luminous a manner as he does in his letters. As already partially quoted, he says :

"The voice of poetry comes from a region above us, a plane of our being above and beyond our personal intelligence, a supermind which sees things in their innermost and largest truth by a spiritual identity and with a lustrous effulgency and rapture and its native language is a revelatory, inspired, intuitive word limpid or subtly vibrant or densely packed with the glory of this ecstasy and lustre. It is the possession of the mind by the supramental touch and the communicated impulse to seize this sight and word that creates the psychological phenomenon of poetic inspiration and it is the invasion of it by a superior power

to that which it is normally able to harbour that produces the temporary excitement of brain and heart and nerve which accompanies the inrush of the influence."¹

This, at any rate, is the true psychological interpretation or explanation of the kind of strange physical or sensational symptoms which the artists often say, they feel when the creative mood is theirs or suddenly descends on them. One is reminded here of Housman's personal statement: "Experience has taught me, when I am shaving on a morning, to keep watch over my thoughts, because, if a line of poetry strays into my memory, my skin bristles so that the razor ceases to act. This particular symptom is accompanied by a shiver down the spine; there is another which consists in a constriction of the throat and a precipitation of water to the eyes; and there is a third which I can only describe by borrowing a phrase from one of Keats's last letters, where he says, speaking of Fanny Browne, 'everything that reminds me of her goes through like a spear'. The seat of this sensation is the pit of the stomach."² This is quite all right for the creation of vital or emotional or vitalised intellectual poetry but even here it is not quite right to say that the "seat" of such a creative sensation is "the pit of the stomach", or that, as Housman says again, poetry is, "more physical than intellectual".³ Eliphaz the Temanite to whom Housman refers in that essay puts the matter much more correctly when he says: 'a spirit passed before my face: the hair of my flesh stood up'. But it is not till we come to the luminous psychological interpretation of the true sources of poetic creation by Sri Aurobindo that we get a truer, deeper, subtler and more convincing knowledge of the very origin and the whole process of artistic creation, and the accompaniment, if any, of either physical or nervous or cerebral sensation.

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1. *F.P.*, pp. 392-93.

2. *The Name and Nature of Poetry* reproduced in *The Creative Process*, op. cit., p. 90.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

Chapter 9

THE TECHNIQUE OF POETIC EXPRESSION

If poetry is a subtle process originating from some creative source of inspiration where, in fact, the whole poem is ready and complete and only needs a fit, well-attuned human instrument--a truly responsive Aeolian harp, as it were,—for its faithful transcription or, better still, transmission, it is evident that it is through the fullest possible collaboration of these two agencies the transmitting and the receiving apparatuses, that we can expect to get the perfect poetic expression. We have learnt in the last two chapters something about the nature, levels and planes of the creative, transmitting power of inspiration. Though in ordinary parlance we use only one generic word 'inspiration' to describe or indicate the place of origin of poetry, yet, as Sri Aurobindo has shown us, with such an admirable precision and an almost scientific analysis and definition, we see that in actual practice not all poets draw upon the same level or plane of inspiration and write in any single uniform manner, charged with an unvarying potency or effectivity. As the immediate sources of inspiration belong to different creative planes, each with its own characteristic quality, power and style of expression, and as what usually happens is that these various subtle, fluid interpenetrating planes get mixed up and involved with each other while in active creation so much so that the various parts or fragments of the same poem may float from quite different planes of creative inspiration resulting in a fairly complex, almost multitudinous coherence or unity, so one of the reasons why we get so much variety of poetic forms and styles, substance and themes, rhythms and movements, as also merits and demerits may be now easily understandable. But the nature or level of the originating sources of inspiration is only one of the determining factors for this endless variety of poetic manifestation or expression. The other factor, as already seen, is the human instrument which has to act as the receptacle of inspiration. And it is here that the question of 'technique' in poetry—used, of course, in the largest possible sense—comes in.

Unless the poet has risen very high in his consciousness,

has become almost a Yogi in the Aurobindonian sense, i.e. has begun to take poetry also to be but one of the means of spiritual discipline and attainment, and not merely self-expression or even the all-absorbing, all-important passion and pursuit of his life, it is very difficult for him to be sure, every time, of the power of inspiration. He cannot contact as he wills, and be perfectly entuned with the particular plane of consciousness he wishes to tap at the moment. Nearly every artist or poet has spoken about the utter uncertainty and ungraspable mystery of the inspirational power, and either joyfully or reluctantly realised the necessity for perfecting one's own receiving poetic apparatus through honest industry and patience, study, imitation and exercise, if not for any other purpose than to keep oneself fully ready to respond faithfully and to the best of one's capacity when the inspirational call comes. Even Sri Aurobindo who was such an ardent and complete believer in the power of inspiration could not quite dispense with the need for industry and toil either in theory or actual poetic practice. It is another matter that every time that he worked he could feel the presence and power of inspiration working with him like an act of Divine force and that even when he revised a line or a word or a whole passage or poem, it was done more by the action of the inspirational force itself than his own effort or labour of the brain. It is significant that what he objected to was the easy temptation, on the part of the artist, to use his brain or ordinary logical, rational mind for censoring what inspiration had naturally sent to him or artificially bolstering up the fading or already faded energy of inspiration. Intellect, to him, was too much of a meddling busybody to be of any real help in the act of poetic or artistic creation; nay, it was even a positive hindrance. But intellect is not the only instrument with which an artist or poet works. On the contrary, his usual instruments are much finer, subtler and profounder than the intellect, and they have got to be perfected through hard, honest industry, even if the poet believes in and depends upon the force of inspiration to draw him out. But above all, as he said in one of his letters, "in practice most poets have to sustain the inspiration by industry". Herein, therefore, according to him, lies the need for the greatest effort on the part of the poet. The latter must be ever vigilant and well-equipped with all his expressive instruments so that the angel of inspiration

should feel tempted, or at least should not feel hesitant, to visit and reside in the all-open abode of his consciousness, as often as possible, until the time comes when he is all the time so completely possessed by that sweet angelic power that he becomes "the mouthpiece of the gods" and utters only the *mantra* like the Vedic and Upanishadic poet-seers. His main effort lies in keeping all the time "the right concentrated silence or seeking somewhere in the mind with the right openness to the Word that is trying to express itself".

This, of course, in the Aurobindonian sense, is the best or highest technique to be mastered by the poet the technique of the true Yogic consciousness of, and openness to, the Word. It is not a question of developing so much one's personal creative capacities as the capacity for receptivity, and "for that the sole thing necessary is an entire or at least a dominant will to receive".¹ Indeed, it involves, in fact, the capacity for showing one's utmost courage which lies in daring to take the full plunge into the Infinite, and ultimately, by getting rid of all personal self or ego, and attaining the condition of "negative capability" in a more than Keatsian sense, in becoming oneself the Infinite.

But obviously this is a thing which is not easy to have. And until one has it, it is not at all wise to stop writing poetry altogether. On the contrary, the human instruments of verbal expression have got to be used and perfected through knowledge and understanding, practice and exercise. And it is here that we have to grapple with the problem of poetic technique as we ordinarily understand it—a technique which, according to Sri Aurobindo, involves, in the main, three factors : (i) rhythmic movement, (ii) style or verbal form and thought-substance, and (iii) the soul's vision of truth. He is, of course, thinking here, as nearly always, particularly in *The Future Poetry*, of great or high poetry, i.e., the kind of poetry which in the ultimate analysis possesses the capacity for crystallising itself into a *mantra*, the *ne plus ultra* of poetry, according to him. We may quote here again the relevant passage for keeping it firmly fixed in our mind in order to understand what he really means when he speaks of technique in poetry.

"The mantra, poetic expression of the deepest spiritual reality,

1. *L.L.Y.*, op. cit., p. 22.

is only possible when three highest intensities of poetic speech meet and become indissolubly one, a highest intensity of rhythmic movement, a highest intensity of verbal form and thought-substance, of style, and a highest intensity of the soul's vision of truth. All great poetry comes about by a unison of these three elements; it is the insufficiency of one or another which makes the inequalities in the work of even the greatest poets; and it is the failure of some one element which is the cause of their lapses.... But it is only at a certain highest level of the fused intensities that the mantra becomes possible."¹

But Sri Aurobindo would, first of all, like us to be quite clear about the importance of this thing which we call 'technique' in poetry. In a way, there has hardly been a time when the technique used in poetry has not exercised the mind of the poet and the critic. But in modern times we find that it is regarded as the most absorbing and important thing by the poet and the critic alike. There is hardly a poet today who is not conscious of the particular technique he is employing and why he is doing so; and the critic of poetry who does not concern himself with questions of technique is today rarer still. Even the most 'inspired' poets and critics are not altogether oblivious of its importance. And Sri Aurobindo, too, in actual practice is not an exception and, when opportunities presented themselves to him, he did not disdain to discuss with at least some of his disciples the understandable aspects and problems of the technique involved in his composition of that poetic *magnum opus*, *Savitri* the whole of which, came to him through the overhead planes of creative inspiration, and at places directly from the Overmind or even Supermind, the original home of creative Truth-Consciousness, i.e. planes where an altogether different conception of technique obtains and all the hitherto acquired ideas of it are found inadequate and ineffective.

And yet at the very beginning of *The Future Poetry*, his chief work of literary criticism, he draws our attention to the limited range of the importance of technique, particularly in the realm of poetry. There is no doubt, he says, that "in all art good technique is the first step towards perfection."² But "this is just the first step and the

1. *F.P.*, p. 23.

2. *F.P.*, p. 14.

artist concerned has to cover many other steps",¹ almost a whole world beyond the first step before he can achieve the perfection he seeks. Indeed, there is no dearth of examples where we find that "a deficient correctness of execution" does not at all stand in the way of "an intense and gifted soul.... creating great poetry which keeps its hold on the centuries".² But the most important thing which we have to remember, suggests Sri Aurobindo, is that "technique, however indispensable, occupies a smaller field perhaps in poetry than in any other art".³ And some of the quite evident reasons are that its instrument which is the rhythmic word is "fuller of subtle and immaterial elements" than is the case with the other arts. As quoted in an earlier chapter, the rhythmic word, for example, "has a subtly sensible element, its sound value, a quite immaterial element, its significance or thought value, and both of these again, its sound and its sense, have separately and together a soul value, a direct spiritual power, which is infinitely the most important thing about them".⁴ All these three important, almost indispensable values in poetry—viz. the sound-value, the sense-value and the underlying soul-value in each separately as well as together—are all so subtle and beyond the intellectual analysis of the semanticists, phonetists, psychologists, etc., that even the most brilliant and scholarly technical knowledge of these things will not enable one to become a poet or to appreciate and enjoy a poem unless one possesses that subtle something, the fine intuitive or sixth sense which alone enables us to enter the poetic sanctuary with ease and profit in a proper frame of mind. No doubt, says Sri Aurobindo, the rhythmic word of poetry "comes to birth with a small element subject to the laws of technique, yet almost immediately, almost at the beginning of its flight, its power soars up beyond the province of any laws of mechanical construction".⁵ This is chiefly because this particular, and in a way, sole instrument of the poet is "the most complex, flexible, variously suggestive"⁶ of all the known instruments of artistic expression, and has, consequently, "more infinite possibilities in many

1. Ibid., p. 14.

2. Ibid., p. 14.

3. Ibid., p. 14.

4. Ibid., pp. 14-15.

5. Ibid., p. 15.

6. Ibid., p. 14.

directions than any other".¹

And, as to the form of poetry, its physical verbal shape and structure with which quite a good deal of modern literary criticism, more in America than in England, seems to be intensely preoccupied since the 1920's, we shall have to admit, if we are honest enough, that even the most brilliantly scientific and intellectually satisfying analysis of it leaves us rather dissatisfied within, mainly because while it, no doubt, enables us to gain an appreciable knowledge of the materials which went into the making of the particular poem and of the way these took shape and cohered in the poet's mind and ultimately came down on paper in an organised form, it is also apt to destroy, or at least sufficiently obstruct, our ability to get near the spirit, the inner life and heart-beat, the subtle thought-vibrations etc. which are rather beyond the reach of the scientific outlook and method, so popular and fashionable today with a large number of literary critics and aestheticians. The one primary thing which even the most painstakingly well-intentioned critic of poetry today is apt to forget is that a poem is as good and growing a living organism as any other in this material universe. It is born out of the consciousness of an intensely living human, nay, as Sri Aurobindo would like us to remember spiritual being and is meant for the delight of another such living spiritual being. As such, its form can never be something which can be considered as a thing all important in itself and altogether or even partially divorced from the subtle spiritual consciousness which embodied itself in that form. Analyse a living organism, nay a plant or flower or even an atom which looks apparently inert, with as much intellectual brilliance and scientific accuracy as you can, and you spoil the very life and spirit of it. It is already dead in your hands and you are left only with a memory of it, its previous living existence. Poetry is such a living organic spiritual thing, and if at all we wish to consider it as some subtle thought-product, well, it is, as Emerson so beautifully put it, "...a thought so passionate and alive that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing."²

With regard to the formal structure of poetry, there-

1. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

2. R. P. Cowl, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

fore, Sri Aurobindo, almost reminiscent of Coleridge's attitude towards Shakespeare's plays, tells us: "Rather it determines itself its own form."¹ And as he connects the poetic expression nearly invariably with the expression of the poet's soul-consciousness which is obviously a subtle and complex thing, so, quite naturally, he says, "...the perfection of his sound-movement and style comes entirely as the spontaneous form of his soul: that utters itself in an inspired rhythm and an innate, a revealed word"². This "supreme poetic utterance" being his main task which he achieves directly as "the spontaneous form of his soul", it is quite evident that "the poet least of all artists needs to create with his eye fixed anxiously on the technique of his art"³.

According to Sri Aurobindo, therefore, one of the distinctive features of the artist, who is called the poet, is that he does not have to bother much, at least with his conscious intellect, about the technique he needs to employ for achieving his purpose. It is his soul-consciousness which will be his best guide for all practical purposes. But if the aim is quite high, if it is nothing short of the achievement of that perfect and most intense poetic expression which is known in our country as the *mantra*, then the poet has to look to certain things a little more carefully, try his best to fulfil certain conditions more consciously. The soul-consciousness, no doubt, will continue to be his best mentor but the aid of other contributory powers has also got to be requisitioned, of course, subject to the approval and direction of the soul-power. It is here, therefore, that Sri Aurobindo refers to the three fundamental intensities of expression, quoted before, which are absolutely indispensable for the creator of the mantric poetry he has in view: highest rhythmic intensity as well as the highest intensities of style and vision. We shall now examine, in some detail, these three poetic powers of rhythm, style and vision which, according to him, are the three fundamental factors involved in the technique of poetic expression.

First, about rhythm, which, he says, is "of primary importance", in poetry "from a certain point of view."⁴ This is "the first fundamental, indispensable element

1. *F.P.*, p. 15.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

without which all the rest, whatever its other value, remains unacceptable to the Muse of poetry".¹ But Sri Aurobindo makes it clear that by 'rhythm or poetic movement' he does not merely mean metrical rhythm, "even in a perfect technical excellence".² This kind of perfection is no doubt necessary for the poet, for this is "the first step, the physical basis". He has to look carefully to such important things as "the variation of movement without spoiling the fundamental structure of the metre, right management of vowel and consonantal assonances and dissonances, the masterful combination of the musical element of stress with the less obvious element of quantity, etc."³ But then he must not forget that there is another, and a much more important, consideration than this involved in poetic rhythm. It is "the secret soul of rhythm which uses but exceeds these things".⁴ He says, one can learn comparatively easily these various constituents of the rhythmic structure, if one's ear is attuned to them, in what he calls the "*tapasya* of vigilant attention"⁵, but unless the more important factor, namely the sense of the secret soul of rhythm is also there, what one may achieve, "may be technically faultless and even skilful" but it is "poetically a dead letter".⁶ And this soul of rhythm, he says, "can only be found by listening in to what is behind the music of words and sounds and things".⁷ That is to say, the poet has to learn and develop the capacity for catching what Keats so felicitously described as "unheard" melodies. It is when he begins to catch them, or, to be more correct, to be caught by them, to work under the influence and mastery of "a deeper and more subtle music, a rhythmical soul-movement entering into the metrical form and often overflowing it"⁸ that his "real poetic achievement begins." In Sri Aurobindo's view, therefore, "a mere metrical excellence, however subtle, rich or varied, however perfectly it satisfies the outer ear, does not meet the deeper aims of the creative spirit;

1. Ibid., p. 23.

2. Ibid., p. 23.

3. *L3.*, op. cit., p. 161.

4. Ibid., p. 151.

5. Ibid., p. 161.

6. Ibid., p. 161.

7. Ibid., p. 161.

8. *F. P.*, p. 24.

for there is an inner hearing which makes its greater claim, and to reach and satisfy it is the true aim of the creator of melody and harmony"¹ And as to the capacity for getting this "inner hearing", there is no mental rule which can be laid down for it. Nevertheless, what he advised to one of his correspondents on this point in a letter, is both interesting and useful as well as revealing: "You will get something of it by listening for the subtler element in great poetry, but mostly it must either grow or suddenly open in yourself. This sudden opening can come if the Power within wishes to express itself in that way. I have more than once seen a sudden flowering of capacities in every kind of activity come by a rapid opening of the consciousness; so that one who laboured long without the least success to express himself in rhythm becomes a master of poetic language and cadence almost in a day."² That is to say, poetry being more a thing of the "right concentrated silence" than any active brain-labour, it is the poet's "transmitting mind that must change and become a perfect channel and not an obstacle" to "the word that is trying to express itself" through him.

Having made this subtle, unanalysable aspect of poetic rhythm clear to us, he proceeds to examine the importance of metre and rhyme—the two well-known limbs of poetic movement—which occupy such an important place in what is known as traditional poetry but which are no longer acceptable to 'modernist' poets. Answering, as it were, to all those poets and critics who have spoken against and even denounced, the value of metre and rhyme in poetry, Sri Aurobindo has categorically said in one of his letters, "It is in my view a serious error to regard metre or rhyme as artificial elements, mere external and superficial equipment restraining the movement and sincerity of poetic form."³ Since metre, to put the matter simply, is but "a fixed and balanced system of the measures of sound, *mātrā*"⁴, this can be "not only the traditional, but also surely the right physical basis for the poetic movement"⁵ for, truly speaking, metre is not only "the most natural mould

1. Ibid., p. 24.

2. *L3.*, pp. 161-62.

3. *L3.*, p. 163.

4. *F.P.*, p. 24.

5. Ibid., p. 24.

of expression for certain states of creative emotion and vision, (but) . . . much more natural and spontaneous than a non-metrical form".¹ Also, it cannot be denied that the emotion "expresses itself best and most powerfully in a balanced rather than in a loose shapeless rhythm".² What is more, a preoccupation with the right physical metrical basis for one's poetic movement need not be, according to Sri Aurobindo, any obstacle to the natural inflow of inspiration through this channel. As he said in the same letter, once the best and most appropriate metrical form for expressing what has to be said has been found, "the inspiration can flow quite naturally and fluently into it".³

The moderns, however, seem to be against both metre and rhyme. Of course, the position at the moment is a little different from what it was when Sri Aurobindo was writing this series of articles on the future poetry during the second decade of the 20th century, and what it became particularly during the 1920's and early '30's, i.e. the immediate post-War years. There was already the example of *vers libre* of Whitman in America and Carpenter in England, and quite a number of experimentalists in free verse were making their poetic influence felt not only in France and Italy but all over the European continent, not to speak of England. Sri Aurobindo found in their examples a deliberate denial of the metrical tradition and almost a crusade being conducted against the use of metre which, as usual, came to be regarded as "a limiting bondage, perhaps even a frivolous artificiality or a falsification of true, free and natural poetic rhythm".⁴ This was a development in Europe which he did not consider to be right and with an almost prophetic insight he stated at that time that it was "a point of view which cannot eventually prevail, because it does not deserve to prevail."⁵ And it was not for long that the poetic license as advocated by the champions of *vers libre* could prevail. The poets of the 1930's and their successors, including the *New Lines* poets of today, could not help returning soon to the older tradition of metrical form and rhyme-arrangement. Indeed, Sri Aurobindo had

1. *L3.*, p. 163.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

4. *F.P.*, p. 24.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

quite good reasons for foreseeing such a return of the "prodigal son". As he said, "It certainly cannot triumph, unless it justifies itself by supreme rhythmical achievements beside which the highest work of the great masters of the poetic harmony in the past shall sink into a clear inferiority. That has not been done."¹ And then, again, were the free versifiers really 'free' in their movement? "On the contrary", as he said, "*Vers libre* has done its best when it has either limited its aim in rhythm to a kind of chanting poetical prose or else based itself on a sort of irregular and complex metrical movement which in its inner law, though not in its form, recalls the idea of Greek choric poetry."² Even T.S. Eliot had to confess: "No *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job"³ and that only a bad poet could welcome free verse "as a liberation from form".⁴ Also Ezra Pound's opinion is quite close to Sri Aurobindo's when he stated in *Literary Essays* (1954): "One should write *vers libre* only when one must; that is to say, only when the 'thing' builds up a rhythm more beautiful than that of set metres, or more real, more a part of the emotion of the 'thing', more germane, intimate, interpretative than the measure of regular accentual verse."⁵ And both Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot were conscious breakers of the traditional forms and movements of expression and competent practitioners of *vers libre*.

However, we must not think that Sri Aurobindo stood for metre and rhyme only because these were in the long-established poetic tradition and the most natural mould of expression for poetic emotion and vision. There was a still deeper reason than these. With regard to rhyme, for example, he said, referring particularly to Milton who has been the most powerful opponent of rhyme in English literature, "Milton disparaging rhyme, which he had himself used with so much skill in his earlier, less sublime, but more beautiful poetry, forgot or ignored the spiritual value of rhyme, its power to enforce and clinch the appeal of melodic or harmonic recurrence which is a principal element in the measured movement of poetry, its habit of opening sealed doors to the inspira-

1. Ibid., p. 24.

2. Ibid., p. 24.

3. Introduction to Ezra Pound's *Poems*.

4. *The Music of Poetry*.

5. Quoted in *The World of Poetry*, op. cit., p. 195.

tion, its capacity to suggest and reveal beauty to that supra-intellectual something in us which music is powerful to awake."¹ It is really interesting to observe here that Sri Aurobindo who himself discarded rhyme and adopted blank verse for his greatest poetical work *Savitri* should, unlike Milton, be dispassionate and reasonable and just and lofty enough to discover this deeper truth about the value of rhyme in poetry. It is this deeper psychological and spiritual basis of metre which, according to him, lies behind the ancient Vedic poetic tradition. As he says: "When mankind found out the power of thought and feeling thrown out into fixed and recurring measures of sound to move and take possession of the mind and soul, they were not discovering a mere aesthetic device, but a subtle truth of psychology, of which the conscious theory is preserved in the Vedic tradition. And when the ancient Indians chose more often than not to throw whatever they wished to endure, even philosophy, science and law, into metrical form, it was not merely to aid the memory, they were able to memorise huge prose Brahmanas quite as accurately as the Vedic hymnal or the metrical Upanishads,—but because they perceived that metrical speech has in itself not only an easier durability, but a greater natural power than unmetrical, not only an intense value of sound, but a force to compel language and sense to heighten themselves in order to fall fitly into this stricter mould."² And above all, he drew our attention to a subtle occult truth well-known to the Vedic seers when he wrote, "There is perhaps a truth in the Vedic idea that the Spirit of creation framed all the movements of the world by *chhandas*, in certain fixed rhythms of the formative word, and it is because they are faithful to the cosmic metres that the basic world-movements unchangingly endure. A balanced harmony maintained by a system of subtle recurrence is the foundation of immortality in created things, and metrical movement is simply creative sound grown conscious of this secret of its own powers."³

Having, thus, strengthened his point about the deep psychological and spiritual value of metre in poetic expression he naturally feels it necessary to warn us that "mere force of language tacked on to the trick of metrical

1. *F.P.*, p. 25.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

beat does not answer the higher description of poetry; it may have the form or its shadow, it has not the essence."¹ It is this kind of loose thinking about metre and rhyme, and therefore, of poetic rhythm or movement, as a whole, which, says Sri Aurobindo a little mockingly, "has enabled even the Macaulays and Kiplings to mount their queer poetic thrones".² Yet he is not completely against their superficial metrical vigour and fluency, and, considering "catholicity" to be "always a virtue", is prepared to recognise them as poets. Such a metrical movement as their poetry has, bears its own "merits and powers". It is, at any rate, "good for metrical romances of a sort, for war poetry and popular patriotic poetry, or perhaps any poetry which wants to be an echo of life".³ It cannot fail to stir, if not the soul, at least "the vital being in us like a trumpet or excite it like a drum".⁴

But then, we must not fail to see that after all, "the drum and the trumpet do not carry us far in the way of music".⁵ And yet even this understanding of the limitations of the Macaulaques and Kiplinguesque metrical rhythm is not enough, at least in the eyes of Sri Aurobindo, though he knows that there are "poets of considerable power, sometimes the greatest (who) are satisfied ordinarily with a set harmony or a set melody, which is very satisfying to the outward ear and carries the aesthetic sense along with it in a sort of even, indistinctive pleasure. . . . without any need of an intenser heightening, a deeper appeal".⁶ "It is beautiful poetry; it satisfies the aesthetic sense, the imagination and the ear; but there the charm ends. Once we have heard its rhythm, we have nothing new to expect, no surprise for the inner ear, no danger for the soul being suddenly seized and carried away into unknown depths."⁷

All this may be quite all right if our aim is but to seek the aesthetic and imaginative delight from poetical rhythms. And in such a case we may be quite justified in showing quite a good deal of preoccupation with the

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

“skill in the use of metrical possibilities in the invention of rhythmical turns, devices, modulations, variations”¹ which may be good enough to satisfy the intelligence, and to seize the ear. Indeed, he says, there are even periods of literature in which this kind of skill is carried very far. The rhythms of Victorian poetry, for example, are of this kind. Here, it seems to him, “all kinds of instrumental faculties have been active”.² But “the one thing that is lacking, except in moments of brief periods of inspiration, is the soul behind creating and listening to its own greater movements”.³

The fact being so, Sri Aurobindo very clearly states that “poetic rhythm begins to reach its highest levels, (indeed) the greater poetic movements become possible when rising from and beyond any of these powers the soul begins to make its direct demand and yearn for a profounder satisfaction”.⁴ It is only when “the inner ear begins to listen” that the greater poetic movements and rhythms awake. And—this may, indeed, be felt as surprising enough —“technically...this comes in when the poet becomes, in Keats’s phrase, a miser of sound and syllable, economical of his means, not in the sense of niggardly sparing, but of making the most of all its possibilities of sound”.⁵ “...in these highest, intensest rhythms”, he continues to say, “every sound is made the most of, whether in its suppression or in its swelling expansion, its narrowness or its open wideness, in order to get in the combined effect something which the ordinary flow of poetry cannot give us.”⁶ And on such occasions, even if, on the surface, it appears to be all a technical question and preoccupation, it is really “not the artistic intelligence or the listening physical ear which is most at work, but something within trying to bring out an echo of hidden harmonies, a secret of rhythmical infinities within us”.⁷ Here is, truly speaking, “not a labour of the devising intellect or the aesthetic sense.....but a labour of the spirit within itself to cast something out of the surge of the eternal

1. Ibid., p. 28.

2. Ibid., p. 28.

3. Ibid., p. 28.

4. Ibid., p. 28.

5. Ibid., p. 28.

6. Ibid., p. 29.

7. Ibid., p. 29.

depths".¹ Sri Aurobindo's style truly breaks out into luminous power and beauty, though apparently very serene and bare, when here he speaks about the supreme part which the soul plays in casting the immortal and perfect poetic rhythms out of the surge of its eternal depths :

"The other faculties are there in their place, but the conductor of the orchestral movement is the soul coming forward to get its own work done by its own higher and unanalysable methods. The result is something as near to wordless music as word music can get, and with the same power of soul-life, of soul-emotion, of profound supra-intellectual significance. In these higher harmonics and melodies the metrical rhythm is taken up by the spiritual, it is filled with or sometimes it seems rolled away and lost in a music that has really another and spiritual secret of movement."²

Such, then, is the intensity of rhythm out of which "the greatest possibility of poetic expression arises", according to Sri Aurobindo. "It is the triumph of the spirit over the difficulties and limitations of its physical instrument. Its listener seems to be that eternal spirit whom the Upanishad speaks of as the ear of the ear, he who listens to all hearings; and 'behind the instabilities of word and speech' it is the inevitable harmonies of his own thought and vision for which he is listening."³

However, whether or no we are able to carry the poetic rhythm to the greatest possible height as well as depth of poetic expression, the fact which is indisputable, according to Sri Aurobindo, is that "rhythm is the premier necessity of poetical expression"⁴ In poetry it is not "the thought movement in the words" which matters so much as "the sound-movement which carries on its wave the thought-movement in the word".⁵ And it is the musical sound-image which most helps "to fill in, to extend, subtilise and deepen the thought impression or the emotional or vital impression and to carry the sense beyond itself into an expression of the intellectually inexpressible,—always the peculiar power of music".⁶ Unfortunately, we are apt to ignore this obvious fundamental truth about poetry both as readers and critics.

1. Ibid., p. 29.

2. Ibid., pp. 29-30.

3. Ibid., p. 30.

4. Ibid., p. 31.

5. Ibid., p. 31.

6. Ibid., p. 31.

though it may be safely assumed that the authentic poets themselves are nearly always aware of it either sufficiently consciously or in a subtle unconscious way. Still, as Sri Aurobindo points out to us, there seems to be quite a wide divergence between the poetry of the ancients and that of the moderns on this score. It is not just an accident that, in the past, poetry was meant to be recited and even sung by the writer and the listener alike, whereas, as we march forward in civilisation and our arts and letters get sophisticated, our poetry begins to turn into a thing of reading and reflection rather than singing and recitation. But the ancients "were more in the habit of singing, chanting or intoning their poetry".¹ It is because "we are content to read ours" that we are so much preoccupied with the intellectual and emotional elements of poetry, and this, quite obviously, "unduly depresses the rhythmic value".² It is an undeniable fact which Sri Aurobindo points out to us when he says, "The ancients would not so easily as the moderns have admitted into the rank of great poets writers of poor rhythmic faculty or condoned, ignored or praised in really great poets' rhythmic lapses, roughnesses and crudities for the sake of their power of style and substance."³

Yet, this supreme importance of the rhythmic faculty in a poet does not mean that "significance does not matter and need not enter into the account in judging and feeling poetry".⁴ On the contrary, what Sri Aurobindo would have the poet and reader and critic remember is that "rhythm and word-music are indispensable but are not the whole of poetry".⁵ And this naturally means that "the significance and feeling borne home by the words and rhythms are a capital part of the value of poetry". Citing an example from Shakespeare,

Absent thee from felicity awhile,

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,

he points out that here the lines have no doubt a "skilful and consummate rhythm and word-combination, but this gets its full value as the perfect embodiment of a profound and moving significance, the expression in a

1. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

4. *L3.*, op. cit., p. 14.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

few lines of a whole range of human world-experience".¹

This naturally brings us to the importance of style and substance in poetry. He would, first of all, like to point out: In what does poetic style really consist?

This, he says, can be best understood when we try to fix in our mind the basic difference between ordinary speech and poetic language. "Ordinary speech", as he puts it, "uses language mostly for a limited practical utility of communication; it uses it for life and for the expression of ideas and feelings necessary or useful to life."² It is this which gives rise to what we may call the conventional use of language. There we treat words as so many conventional signs standing for the things and ideas of life, "much as we use any kind of common machine or simple implement". And thus "we treat them as if, though useful for life, they were themselves without life". But certainly this is not all the truth that lies there in our use of words, for even within this "limited practical utility of communication" we convey not merely things but ideas and feelings, thoughts and sensations etc. And when we do so we find that we "put a more vital power into them... out of ourselves, by marked intonations of the voice, by the emotional force or vital energy we throw into the sound so as to infuse into the conventional word-sign something which is not inherent in itself".³ This is, broadly and briefly speaking, what has happened to words with the growth of civilisation. But such was not the case in the primitive times when words were in the process of originating. Then they were more than mere lifeless conventional signs: they inherently possessed an expressive dynamic force of their own. Nay, as Sri Aurobindo points out to us, not only did the words have "a real and vivid life of their own, but the speaker was more conscious of it than we can possibly be with our mechanised and sophisticated intellects".⁴ This clearly meant that in the primitive times, the earliest possible stages of the growth of human speech, language "was not intended— or, shall we say, did not intend,—so much to stand for distinct ideas of the intelligence as for feelings, sensations, broad indefinite mental impressions with minute shades

1. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

2. *F.P.*, p. 16.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

of quality in them which we do not care to pursue".¹ As to the intellectual sense in its precision, this "must have been a secondary element which grew more dominant as language evolved".² Anyway, it is not difficult for us now to believe that the early language of man possessed "a powerful life, a concrete vigour" of its own; and it is exactly here in this concrete, powerful life-aspect that it comes close to poetic speech. On this basis we may be quite justified in saying that the language of the primitive early man was really poetic. It had a vivid, living quality of its own which our language has lost in course of its sophisticated evolution, however much it may have "gained in precision, clarity, utility".³

We may, therefore, say that when poetry uses language, it seeks to recover, as much as it can, this vivid element or power which the latter originally possessed. This is done in a number of ways, subject, of course, to the capacity and consciousness of the poet, "partly by a stress on the image replacing the old sensational concreteness, partly by a greater attention to the suggestive force of the sound, its life, its power, the mental impression it carried".⁴ The secret lies ultimately with the poet himself and it may be safely assumed that he rises in the scale of poetic achievement by degrees as he "brings out not only the definitive intellectual value of the word, not only its power of emotion and sensation, its vital suggestion, but through and beyond these its soul-suggestion, its spirit".⁵ In any case, it is in this way that "poetry arrives at the indication of infinite meanings beyond the finite intellectual meaning the word carries... (and) expresses not only the life-soul of man as did the primitive word, not only the ideas of his intelligence for which speech now usually serves, but the experience, the vision, the ideas, as we may say, of the higher and wider soul in him".⁶ And it is in this way by making these things real to our life-soul as well as present to our intellect that "it opens to us by the word the doors of the Spirit".⁷

Thus, while "the first aim of prose style is to define and

1. Ibid., p. 17.

2. Ibid., p. 17.

3. Ibid., p. 18.

4. Ibid., p. 18.

5. Ibid., p. 18.

6. Ibid., p. 18.

7. Ibid., p. 18.

fix an object, fact, feeling, thought before the appreciating intelligence with whatever clearness, power, richness or other beauty of presentation may be added to that essential aim, the first aim of poetic style is to make the thing presented living to the imaginative vision, the spiritual sense, the soul-feeling and soul-sight".¹ Here the key phrase is "to make the thing presented living to the imaginative vision, the spiritual sense....", for the essential power of the poetic word is "to make us see, not to make us think or feel"²; indeed, whatever thought or feeling is there "must arise out of or rather be included in the sight".³ It is, thus, the sight which is "the primary consequence and power of poetic speech."⁴ A poem, as an English poet and critic has said, must not mean but "be"; and the "being" of a poem can be best communicated through the poetic faculty of sight. The very growth of a poem as a living organism must be made visible to our imaginative and spiritual seeing, even, if possible, our physical-mental seeing. Conrad's aim, too, as an artist, we remember, was to enable his readers to "see" what he intended to communicate through his novels and in so far as he employed his prose art for this purpose, he was really trying to achieve what is essentially the poetic condition or poetic style. In a way all poets, whether concerned with the description of an object or event, or the depiction of feelings and ideas, really aim at this subtle pictorial effect and have, therefore, to possess, in an appreciable degree, the power of "imaging" the whole experience in such a way that the sensitive reader, too, gets the living illusion of reality before him. But for the poet who aims still higher than this and seeks to "make us live in the soul and in the inner mind what is ordinarily lived in the outer mind and the senses",⁵ it is essential that "he must first make us see by the soul, and its light and with its deeper vision what we ordinarily see in a more limited and halting fashion by the senses and the intelligence".⁶ It is because, as the ancients have declared, both in the East and in the West, "he is . . . a seer and not merely a maker of rhymes,

1. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

not merely a jongleur, rhapsodist or troubadour, and not merely a thinker in lines and stanzas".¹ And what is the crowning point of his essential seeing? It is but to see "beyond the sight of the surface mind" and find "the revealing word, not merely the adequate and effective, but the illumined and illuminating, the inspired and inevitable word, which compels us to see also".² Indeed, one may go so far as to say that "to arrive at that word is the whole endeavour of poetic style".³ And it is here that it is completely distinguished from prose style.

But there cannot be, and is not in fact, any one invariable poetic style. On the contrary, there is a fairly large variety of it. Indeed, nearly every poet worth his salt has a poetic style of his own and, consequently, a technique of verbal expression of his own. This thing, called verbal expression, is closely integrated with the poetic substance and imagination of the poet. The whole thing taken together will naturally give rise to some marked categories of poetry, each having a poetic style of its own. That is to say, each kind of poetry with its own particular poetic substance and imagination is apt to give rise to its own particular poetic style, for, as Sri Aurobindo says, "between the word and the vision there tends to be, though there is not by any means perfectly or invariably, a certain equation".⁴ As such, the poetry of strong sensational substance and imagination will give rise to what he would call the vital poetic style; that of strong emotion and passion, the emotional poetic style; and for the poetry of intellectual and psychological ideas, problems and "criticisms of life" we get what may be called the intellectual poetic style. These are the three styles, in the main, which we usually meet with in poetry. But it is essential for us to distinguish them from "the language of the higher spiritual imagination" or that of the inner, psychic imagination, and to remember that even the "forceful expression of thought and sentiment is not enough for this higher language"⁵ or psychic speech of "sweetness and light". Citing a few examples from

1. Ibid., p. 33.

2. Ibid., p. 33.

3. Ibid., p. 33.

4. Ibid., p. 35.

5. Ibid., p. 35.

Byron, Browning and Pope from English poetry and comparing them with verses and references drawn from the Gita with a more or less the same thought-substance or thought-experience, Sri Aurobindo proves how the English poets fail to convey the deeper truths of the experience or "touch the deeper fountain-heads of truth in us" simply because their poetic style is not able to go beyond the force of vital, emotional or intellectual substance and imagination, and reach that level of the poetry of spiritual poetic vision which the Gita in the main so supremely is.

Sri Aurobindo, therefore, reminds us that there is a higher style of poetry than these three common modes of expression, the vital, the emotional and the intellectual styles. This higher style is "no longer poetical language of a merely intellectual, vital or emotional force, but instead or in addition a genuinely imaginative style, with a certain, often a great beauty of vision in it whether objective or subjective, or with a certain, often a great but indefinite soul-power bearing up its movement of word and rhythm".¹ Of course, it varies in intensity. At the lower end "we can get plenty of examples from Chaucer, when he is indulging his imagination rather than his observation"² and then there is Spenser "at a higher pitch" of this very kind of imaginative intensity which Chaucer exhibits. As for "the loftier intensity" of this genuinely imaginative style "we can cite", says Sri Aurobindo, "at will for one kind from Milton's early poetry, for another from poets who have a real spiritual vision like Keats and Shelley".³

This, broadly speaking, is the "mould" in which English poetry ordinarily runs from one kind or level of intensity to the next higher and loftier one. And yet even the kind of loftier imaginative intensity which poets like Spenser and Milton reach at one end of the scale, and Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats do at the other, being endowed at times with some "real spiritual vision", is not, according to Sri Aurobindo, "that highest intensity of the revelatory poetic word from which the mantra starts". A "high pleasure" is no doubt there which is not quite "unspiritual in its nature" but it is certainly "not that point where pleasure passes into or is rather

1. Ibid., p. 37.

2. Ibid., p. 37.

3. Ibid., p. 37.

drowned in the pure spiritual Ananda, the ecstasy of the creative, poetic revelation"¹ that is to say, the delight of that "great formative and illuminative power" which is more than even "a godlike pastime".

Such a supreme intensity can come when "all is powerfully carried on the surge of a spiritual vision which has found its inspired and inevitable speech".² It does not belong to any particular style and is not dependent upon any conceivable mould, pattern or formula of language. It may reveal its beauty and power in such varied linguistic structures or patterns as "the decorative imaged style" of a Kalidasa or a Shakespeare, or that "bare and direct expression where language seems to be used as a scarcely felt vaulting board for a leap into the infinite" such as we often find in the Upanishadic poetry, or a style "which uses either the bare or the imaged form at will, but fills every word with the utmost possible rhythmic and thought suggestion"³, such as Sri Aurobindo himself or Shakespeare can easily command. But whether it uses this form or that, the decorative pattern or one of utmost "poetic nudism", this highest intensity in the style of the poetry of intuitive spiritual imagination is, in the ultimate analysis, not dependent on any of these things, for it is, really speaking, not a style at all but the very "poetic style itself, the Word"⁴, and "creates and carries with it its elements rather than is created by them".⁵ And it is here that the sublime mantric poetry of the Veda and the Upanishads and the Gita, for example, easily gains ascendancy over nearly the whole gamut of English poetic achievement.

However, as Sri Aurobindo tells us, "this highest intensity of style and movement which is the crest of the poetical impulse and its self-expression, the point at which the aesthetic, the vital, the intellectual element of poetic speech pass into the spiritual, justifies itself perfectly when it is the body of a deep, high or wide spiritual vision into which the life-sense, the thought, the emotion or the beauty in the thing discovered and its expression,—for all great poetic utterance is discovery,—

1. Ibid., p. 38.

2. Ibid., p. 38.

3. Ibid., p. 38.

4. Ibid., p. 38.

5. Ibid., p. 38.

rise on the wave of the culminating poetic inspiration into an ecstasy of sight. In the lesser poets these moments are rare and come like brilliant accidents, angels' visits, in the greater they are more frequent outbursts, but in the greatest they abound because they arise from a constant faculty of poetic vision and poetic speech which has its lesser and its greater moments, but never entirely fails them".¹

This is one of the most felicitously written critical passages in *The Future Poetry* indeed, one meets with quite a number of such large, inspired statements in course of the book -, making one feel, in a reassuringly exhilarating manner, that the tradition and joys of creative critical writing, such as the sorts which Hazlitt practised with such consummate skill and charm before, and A.C. Bradley and Wilson Knight in their books of Shakespearean interpretation and Virginia Woolf in the two volumes of *The Common Reader* have done with ease today, are not yet dead. Besides the sheer aesthetic pleasure and satisfaction which one invariably gets here, the charm that deepens the quality and value of one's experience lies in the fact that the critical observations, instead of getting distractedly lost in the beauty and eloquence of a highly imaginative style of writing, flash upon the inward eye and illuminate the deeper recesses of the mind with a peculiarly haunting incandescence and one feels unusually enlightened on the topic under examination.

Here in this passage Sri Aurobindo draws our critical attention to two points: (i) "all great poetic utterance is discovery", and (ii) all poetry of even the highest intensity of style and rhythm is perfectly justified only when it is ultimately "the body of a deep, high or wide spiritual vision". Vision, therefore, is not only an indispensable but the ultimate, crowning point in poetry. The poet should be able to make a real "discovery" himself before he can communicate what is known as poetic vision in literary criticism. The necessity for this particular ability or faculty for the poet provides Sri Aurobindo with the occasion to make another richly significant and critically memorable statement about the true power and function of the poet-artist. And the statement is of a nature which can easily take a high rank among the pronouncements of this kind in English

1. Ibid., p. 39,

or Greek and Latin literary criticism.

"Vision", says Sri Aurobindo, "is the characteristic power of the poet, as is discriminative thought the essential gift of the philosopher and analytic observation the natural genius of the scientist. The Kavi was in the idea of the ancients the seer and revealer of truth, and though we have wandered far enough from that ideal to demand from him only the pleasure of the ear and the amusement of the aesthetic faculty, still all great poetry preserves something of that higher truth of its own aim and significance. Poetry, in fact, being Art, must attempt to make us see, and since it is to the inner senses that it has to address itself for the ear is only its physical gate of entry and even there its real appeal is to an inner hearing, and since its object is to make us live within ourselves what the poet has embodied in his verse, it is an inner sight which he opens in us, and this inner sight must have been intense in him before he can awaken it in us."¹

This, therefore, is the deeper significance and interpretation of the words "discovery" and "sight". It is in the subtler and profounder meaning of 'vision' that Sri Aurobindo would have us understand those familiar terms, and even if literary criticism has already made us familiar with the word 'vision' in connection with art and poetry, yet if we collect at one place the bulk of the available critical statements about it, we shall discover that these rather fall short of the standard of meaning which Sri Aurobindo puts into it from the very first.

However, whether or not the critics are able to see the deeper significance of the terms "sight" and "vision", what Sri Aurobindo tells us about one particular and distinctive quality of the greatest poets of the world is quite true. It is that such poets have been always "those who have had a large and powerful interpretative and intuitive vision of Nature and Life and man and whose poetry has arisen out of that in a supreme revelatory utterance of it".² There may be, no doubt, a difference amongst them in other respects and qualities, and even here they may possess different degrees or levels of the power of seeing and visioning. But this essential poetic gift of sight each one of them possesses. "Homer,

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

Shakespeare, Dante, Valmiki, Kalidasa, however much they may differ in everything else, are at one in having this as the fundamental character of their greatness."¹ Why is it that Shakespeare, for example, is so much superior in expression to Bacon whose one short essay is packed with more thought than a whole play of Shakespeare? It is simply because "it was the constant outstreaming of form and thought and image from an abundant vision of life which made Shakespeare, whatever his other deficiencies, the sovereign dramatic poet"² and it was "the very nature of his thought-power and the characteristic way of expression of the born philosophical thinker"³ which hampered Bacon in his poetic expression when he tried to write poetry.

Unfortunately in modern times the tendency seems to be "towards laying a predominant value on the thought in poetry", consciously or unconsciously. It is, no doubt, perfectly understandable, for "we live still in an age which is in great intellectual trouble and ferment about life and the world and is developing enormously the human intelligence, in order to grapple with life and master it".⁴ The result is that "for the most part we are much too busy living and thinking to have leisure to be silent and see".⁵ And the effect of such a way of living upon the poet or the artist has been that "we ask of him not so much perfect beauty of song or largeness of creative vision as a message to our perplexed and seeking intellects".⁶ "Therefore, we hear constantly today of the 'philosophy' of a poet, even the most inveterate beautifier of commonplaces being forcibly gifted by his admirers with a philosophy, or of his message, the message of Tagore, the message of Whitman. We are asking then of the poet to be, not a supreme singer or an inspired seer of the worlds, but a philosopher, a prophet, a teacher, even something perhaps of a religious or ethical preacher."⁷ In view of such an intellect-dominated and thought-obsessed atmosphere prevailing around us, Sri Aurobindo, it

1. Ibid., p. 40.

2. Ibid., p. 40.

3. Ibid., p. 40.

4. Ibid., p. 41.

5. Ibid., p. 41.

6. Ibid., p. 42.

7. Ibid., p. 42.

appears, considers it to be his duty, by virtue of his being both a poet and literary critic, and not merely a philosopher and spiritual teacher, to state in clear, unambiguous terms, what he conceives to be the true role of a poet: "...when I claim for the poet the role of a seer of Truth and find the source of great poetry in a great and revealing vision of life or God or the gods or man or Nature, I do not mean that it is necessary for him to have an intellectual philosophy of life or a message for humanity, which he chooses to express in verse because he has the metrical gift and the gift of imagery, or a solution of the problems of the age or a mission to improve mankind, or, as it is said, "to leave the world better than he found it". As a man, he may have these things, but the less he allows them to get the better of his poetical gift, the happier it will be for his poetry. Material for his poetry they may give, an influence in it they may be, provided they are transmuted into vision and life by the poetical spirit, but they can be neither its soul nor its aim, nor give the law to its creative activity and its expression."¹

The primary impulse behind all poetic creation should be, therefore, to mould and transmute its form and expression in such a way as to become in its whole pattern or structure a "vision pouring itself into thought-images and not thought trying to observe truth and distinguish".² This is the reason why we find so few poetic successes of philosophical attempts in European literature; whereas in ancient India where the idea of the poet-seer has been clearly and precisely understood and followed, such attempts were successful enough. The Veda, the Upanishads and the Gita, at any rate, "are not at all philosophic thinking, but spiritual seeing, a rush of spiritual intuitions throwing themselves inevitably into the language of poetry, shaped out of fire and life, because that is their natural speech and a more intellectual utterance would have falsified their vision".³

However, in order to arrive at the *mantra*, it does not matter much to the poet, whether thought-matter is "prominent in his work" or it is "life-substance" which predominates. As Sri Aurobindo says: "He may proceed by sheer force of presentation or by direct power of interpretation. He may make this world his text,

1. Ibid., p. 42.

2. Ibid., p. 44.

3. Ibid., p. 45.

or wander into regions beyond, or soar straight into the pure empyrian of the infinite. To arrive at the mantra he may start from the colour of a rose, or the power or beauty of a character, or the splendour of an action, or go away from all these into his own secret soul and its most hidden movements."¹

But for such an achievement to be possible, says Sri Aurobindo, it is not only necessary that the poet himself should be an exceptionally spiritually developed being and a vertiable lord of words but the age, too, should have acquired an appreciable depth and height of spiritual consciousness.

It can happen with felicity at a time "when the soul in things comes nearer to man and other worlds than the physical open themselves to him"² in an ever-increasing manner and degree and on a larger, ever-widening scale. Sri Aurobindo assures us that we have now entered an age "when the spiritual itself is the possession of the greatest minds and... stands on the verge of its revelation".³ The age which has now drawn close to us is one "in which all the worlds are beginning to open to man's gaze and invite his experience, and in all he is near to the revelation of the Spirit of which they are, as we choose, the veils, the significant forms and symbols or else the transparent raiment".⁴ And, therefore, we have now every reason to hope that in our own days even "a poet of secondary power in his moments of inspiration can get to a vision far more satisfying to us than Shakespeare or Dante".⁵

However, whether we share this sublime optimism of Sri Aurobindo regarding the age we have inherited, or whether we feel utterly damped and despondent on account of the apparently alarming manner in which we seem to have reached the very dead end of our scientific and intellectual civilisation, so long as we are what we are and choose to talk about poetry, we cannot help saying along with Sri Aurobindo about the poetic art that it is not sufficient for it to attain only "high intensities of word and rhythm; it must have, to fill them, an answering intensity of vision"⁶ and that "this does not depend only

1. Ibid., p. 48.

2. Ibid., p. 50.

3. Ibid., p. 50.

4. Ibid., pp. 50-51.

5. Ibid., p. 50.

6. Ibid., p. 54.

on the individual power of vision of the poet, but on the mind of his age and country, its level of thought and experience, the adequacy of its symbols, the depth of its spiritual attainment".¹

We may, then, conclude by saying that the whole problem of the 'technique' of poetic speech or expression, as required by the poet according to Sri Aurobindo, boils down to but a triple endeavour in the art of handling a resilient triple-stringed instrument. It is not even so much of an instrument, obliging us to think as if poetry were some pragmatic, scientific activity, as a process, a subtle, mysterious, delicate process operating no less in the inner or higher chambers of the poet's consciousness' the real poetic workshop beyond the reach of rational thought, than in his external preoccupations with the externalities of the task of giving his thought-substance and vision their appropriate verbal equivalents on a piece of paper in order to realise their right linguistic structure and rhythmic pattern of sound and sense. These two inner and outer activities are delicately conjoined and simultaneous in working. And so we may be quite justified in thinking that the whole problem of adopting the appropriate poetic technique lies, in essence, in discovering that one single but delicately poised and balanced and felicitously integrated instrument which is able to work in three important directions in a close, co-operative endeavour and designed to serve three main indispensable functions together. This three-pronged poetic instrument of rhythm, word and vision acts, or, at any rate, should be made to act, if it is to serve the poet's needs best, as though it were a single, interfused, elastic device with infinitely subtle shades and powers of working, capable of covering the whole poetic endeavour and realising all its aims and purposes. A complex and yet clear-cut, a detachable and yet closely and subtly interfused technique synthetised into one integrated whole and a simultaneously-operating power viz, the power to hear, see and utter the very word subsisting in everything here—, it has not the form and ingenuity of any 'technicality' about it, in the way in which we usually understand it and with which we have been made familiar in so many ways all these centuries by such famous pragmatic critics as Aristotle, Puttenham, Ben Jonson, Dryden, Dr. Johnson,

1. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

and, in our own days, Ezra Pound, I.A.Richards, F.R. Leavis, L.C.Knights, Cleanth Brooks, Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, and quite a host of all those others who may be banded (and shall we also add branded) ? together as the exponents of a scientific, minute-to-the-point 'practical' criticism of the "lemon-squeezing" variety, with sufficient variations, no doubt, in the manner and degree of handling the critical surgical instruments and their linguistic ramifications, in order to give themselves the satisfaction of having achieved what is, after all, no better than the illusion of some personal originality and individuality. Yes, it must be admitted that unlike these well-established masters of Western literary criticism no less than the equally brilliant band of such masters of classical Sanskrit literary criticism as simply wallowed in making hair-splitting distinctions between the various 'Rasas', 'Alankaras', 'Ritis', 'Gunas' and 'Doshas', 'Nayaks and Nayikas' etc., Sri Aurobindo does not deal with the 'technique' or 'technical' problems of poetry in the usual or unusual 'technical' language or jargon, and chooses to work with the minimum possible critical terms and phrases as well as original quotations and critical references, so that his basic aims as an expounder and revealer of the basic truths of poetry should not get obfuscated or unduly distended in course of his central enquiry. His intention, like that of the ideal teacher of the Indian as well as his own conception, is not to impose his views upon the reader but only to suggest and reveal, leaving ample ground for conducting further enquiry in a free and fruitful atmosphere, and, as far as the poets and artists are concerned, giving them the fullest possible scope of joyous self-expression in whatever way they like and about whatever subject they are interested in, including intellectual philosophy and obscure occultism, provided they do not go astray from the true as well as the highest possible aims and ends of poetry. His approach, therefore, even to the so-called technical problems of poetry remain, as ever, basically inward, psychological, and in the best and largest sense, theoretical, reminiscent of Coleridge's in more than one respect, though not at all fragmentary, disjointed and exploratory like his, or of Arnold's without his pedagogic and missionary zeal and language. Indeed, if poetry is taken to be, as is invariably done by him, an essentially inward, spiritual activity brought by the Muse on the earth for the deepest possible expre-

ssion of one's spirit or soul, this is the only way in which the technical problems of poetry can be best tackled.

■ ■ ■

Chapter 10

THE CHARACTER OF ENGLISH POETRY

As indicated before, the poetics of Sri Aurobindo as outlined in *The Future Poetry* particularly, is concerned not only with his general views on the art of poetry, its essence, rhythm and movement, style and substance, inspiration and expression, etc., but with its future as well, and it is here that he has to discover which of the present-day languages of the world is best gifted to embody and express it. Not that he feels obliged to evaluate, for this purpose, in any details, the relative merits of the different outstanding languages of the world, but a comparative reference to some of the well-established and influential Western languages in relation to English is made with an admirable sense of analytical and discriminating knowledge and penetrating understanding. It is, however, on the basis of a more or less intuitive, though, no doubt, also a deeply close knowledge of the English language and its literary achievements hitherto that he seems to feel reasonably convinced that it is this language more than any other which is destined to play the part the language of the future, more or less *mantric*, poetry has to play in due course. He is, no doubt, aware that the spiritual wealth of the English language and literature is not as much as it should be, and certainly much less than that of Sanskrit, for example. But in view of the considerable plasticity of the language, this need not be any serious limitation, provided the opening could be created amongst its literary artists for the new spiritual and fine cultural influences penetrating into it from the East. As he wrote in one of his letters to Dilip Kumar Roy: "A new art of words written from a new consciousness demands a new technique.... It is no use arguing from the spiritual inadequacy of the English language: it has to be made adequate. It has been plastic enough in the past to succeed in expressing all that it was asked to express, however, new: it must now be urged to further new progress."¹

In order, therefore, to substantiate and support this

1. Quoted in the footnote of Sri Krishna Prem's article on *Savitri* in Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual, No. 7, 1948, p. 190.

intuitive conviction about the immense possibilities and bright future of the poetry of the English language, he finds it necessary to indicate in some detail its racial peculiarities and the way it has developed all these centuries. A knowledge of its national roots and its past is, therefore, undoubtedly germane to his purpose; and this is what is attempted in the present and the next chapters.

Like most Romantic poets and critics Sri Aurobindo believes that "the poet . . . creates out of himself",¹ and yet he has also enough of controlling sobriety and sanity of objectivity and detachment to see at the same time that "the work of the poet depends not only on himself and his age, but on the mentality of the nation to which he belongs and the spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic tradition and environment which it creates for him".³ W. J. Courthope, the classic author of the monumental work, *A History of English Poetry*, also expresses more or less the same view: "The poet is, in a sense, the epitome of the imaginative life of his age and nation; and, indeed, it may be said that in what may be called his raw materials his thought, imagination and sentiment—his countrymen co-operate in his work; though the form in which these materials are presented, an all-important contribution, is the creation of the poet alone. Almost every great English poet has shown his consciousness of the organic material life in which he shares. . . ."³ But we have to understand "the mentality of the nation" in the proper perspective, for, as Sri Aurobindo further says, "there is also a larger movement to which we belong, both ourselves and the poet and his poetry. . . ."⁴ What is this larger movement like? It is a kind of evolutionary process which we see "working itself out in different forms and on different lines through the souls of the nations and peoples who have arrived at a strong self-expression by the things of the mind, art and thought and poetry".⁵ Of course, "these things do not. . . form the whole of the movement even as they do not make up the whole of the life of the people; they rather represent its highest points, - or the highest with the exception of the spiritual, in the few

1. F. P. pp. 52-52

2. Ibid, p 52

3. *A History of English Poetry*, Vol. I, Introductory, p. 2

4. F. P., p. 56

5. *Ibid.*, p. 56

nations that have powerfully developed the spiritual force within,—and in them we best see the inner character and aim of that line of the movement”.¹ Though “this general evolution has its own natural periods or ages”² yet “their time periods do not correspond in all the peoples which have evolved them”, nor do they “always follow each other in quite the same order; for in things psychological the Spirit in the world varies his movements more freely than in things physical”.³ However, what is generally and indisputably true is that “every nation or people has or develops a spirit in its being, a special soul-form of the human all-soul and a law of its nature which determines the lines and turns of its evolution. All that is taken from its environment it naturally attempts to assimilate to this spirit, transmute into stuff of this soul-form make apt to and governable by this law of its nature. All its self-expression is in conformity with them. And its poetry, art and thought are the expression of this self and of the greater possibilities of its self to which it moves”.⁴ It is no wonder, then, if we find that the poet and his poetry, howsoever free and individualistic they are, “are part of its movement”.⁵ Not that the poet need be limited by the existing temperament and outward forms of national mind to which he belongs; he may even “exceed them”.⁶ Indeed, as Sri Aurobindo says, “even his work may seem not merely a variation from but a revolt against the limitations of the national mind”.⁷ Yet the greater and stronger fact which even the most individual poet cannot escape from is that “the roots of his personality are there in its (i.e. the national mind’s) spirit and even his variation and revolt are an attempt to bring out something that is latent and suppressed or at least something which is trying to surge up from the secret all-soul into the soul-form of the nation”.⁸

The large fact being so, Sri Aurobindo would have us distinctly remember that the poetry of a nation or people is very closely related to the mentality, the parti-

1. Ibid., p. 57

2. Ibid., p. 57

3. Ibid., p. 57

4. Ibid., pp. 58-59

5. Ibid., p. 59

6. Ibid., p. 59

7. Ibid., p. 59

8. Ibid., p. 59

cular soul-form and evolutionary law of that nation. Before he traces the growth and development of English poetry, therefore, he tries to analyse the precise and distinctive nature of the British nationality and its soul-form as far as it is intellectually possible to do so. Another thing which we should note here is that Sri Aurobindo is not interested in the evolution of English poetry for its own sake, just to satisfy his own or our historical curiosity, but for the purpose of indicating the further line of its development. This, too, he does, as it has been said before, because he finds in English poetry a possible hope and promise of the way the poetry of general mankind itself, and not merely of the English race, has to shape itself in the years to come. English poetry, in his view, in its various efforts and movements so far, as well as the possibilities for the future which it contains, seems to represent the activity and aspiration of the poetic mind of general humanity itself. Hence the particular stress on English poetry, its national characteristics, its evolution as well as its future.

On the face of it we meet with a rather peculiar situation with regard to English poetry. We see, for example, that on the one hand, it is the English language which has, of all the modern European tongues, produced "the most rich and naturally powerful poetry, the most lavish of energy and innate genius";¹ on the other hand, "English poetry and literature have been a far less effective force in the shaping of European culture than those of other tongues inferior actually in natural poetic and creative energy".² "At least", says Sri Aurobindo, "they have had to wait till quite a recent date before they produced any potent effect and even then their direct influence was limited."³

In order to indicate how great has been this limitation of English poetry Sri Aurobindo compares its influence with that of the poetry of some other European races, particularly the Greek and the Roman and the French. As he says, "The poetic mind of Greece and Rome has pervaded and largely shaped the whole artistic production of Europe; Italian poetry of the great age has thrown on some part of it at least a stamp only less profound; French prose and poetry,—but the latter in a much

1. *Ibid.*, p. 69

2. *Ibid.*, p. 60

3. *Ibid.*, p. 60

less degree, - have helped more than any other literary influence to form the modern turn of the European mind and its mode of expression, the short-lived outbursts of creative power in the Spain of Calderon and the Germany of Goethe exercised an immediate, a strong, though not an enduring influence, and the newly created Russian literature has been, though more subtly, among the most intense of recent cultural forces.”¹ Against this achievement of the continental languages and literatures, we find, says Sri Aurobindo, that “to the present day Shakespeare and Byron are the only two great names in English poetry which are generally familiar on the continent and have had a real vogue.”² This was, no doubt, the position when Sri Aurobindo was writing the series of articles of *The Future Poetry*, and we find an appreciable influence since then of such modernist poets as Pound and Eliot outside England. But even here we cannot fail to record that much of the modernity of these poets is itself derived from continental influences, notably those of French Symbolists like Rimbaud and Baudelaire. Moreover, these two notable modernist poets—Pound and Eliot—are not, strictly speaking, true English poets racially. And so in a way we may agree with Sri Aurobindo when he says that “we find the literature of the English tongue and specially its poetry flowing in a large side-stream, always receiving much from the central body of European culture but returning upon it very little”.³ Indeed, “this insularity, not of reception but of reaction, is a marked phenomenon”⁴ of English literature.

This, however, does not indicate “any perversity or obtuseness in the general mind of Europe, but.... some insufficiency or serious defect in the literature itself”.⁵ As Sri Aurobindo says, “English poetry is powerful but it is imperfect, strong in spirit, but uncertain and tentative in form; it is extraordinarily stimulating, but not often quite satisfying. It aims high, but its success is not as great as its effort. Especially its imaginative force exceeds its thought-power; it has indeed been hardly at all a really great instrument of poetic thought-

1. Ibid., pp. 60-61

2. Ibid., p. 61

3. Ibid., p. 61

4. Ibid., p. 61

5. Ibid., p. 61

vision; it has not dealt fruitfully with life." Also when we glance at its history we see that it has been more "that of individual poetic achievement than of a constant national tradition; in the mass it has been a series of poetical revolutions without any strong inner continuity".¹ This means that "it has had no great self-recognising idea or view of life expressing the spiritual attitude of the nation and finding successfully from an early time its own sufficient artistic forms".² And it is precisely "the possession of such a self-recognising spiritual attitude and the attainment of a satisfying artistic form for it which make the poetry of a nation a power in the world's general culture".³ It is self-evident, then, that unless a nation has been able to attain and understand "the perfect form of its own innate character", it will hardly be able to "leave its stamp in the formation of the mind of humanity".⁴

We have but to look at Greek poetry, to take just one example, in order to realise the truth of this observation. According to Sri Aurobindo, "no poetry has had so powerful an influence as Greek poetry", nor is there any other poetry "within its own limits so perfect and satisfying".⁵ All this is because "from beginning to end it dealt with life from one large view-point, that of the inspired reason and the enlightened and chastened aesthetic sense" and "whatever changes overtook it, never departed from this motive which is of the very essence of the Greek spirit".⁶ "Even the poetry of the Greek decadence", Sri Aurobindo goes on to say, "preserved enough of this power to act as a shaping influence on Latin poetry."⁷

Similarly, French poetry, though much more limited in appeal and influence and much less powerful in inspiration than the Greek poetry, has had in it all through its history, two constant features which are that it "deals with life from the standpoint not of the inspired reason, but of the clear-thinking intellect, not of the enlightened

1. Ibid., p. 62.

2. Ibid., p. 62.

3. Ibid., p. 62.

4. Ibid., p. 62.

5. Ibid., p. 62.

6. Ibid., pp. 62-63.

7. Ibid., p. 63.

aesthetic sense, but of emotional sentiment.”¹ And the result is that it has always possessed what Sri Aurobindo calls “brain-stuff” and “poetical fervour and appeal”.² Even throughout “all the changes of the last century” and in spite of “apparent cultural revolutions” the French poetry has remained faithful to “these two motives which are of its very essence” and, therefore, “it has always or almost always found its satisfying and characteristic form.”³ Hence the influence it, too, has exercised from time to time on other European literatures.

But what has been the spirit and form of English poetry? Sri Aurobindo replies by saying that no doubt “there is an English spirit which could not fail to be reflected in its poetry but, not being clearly self-conscious, it is reflected obscurely and confusedly.”⁴ Also, “it has been at war within itself, followed a fluctuation of different motives and never succeeded in bringing about between them a conciliation and fusion”.⁵ No wonder, then, if “its form has suffered” and “it has had indeed no motive and characteristic principle of form which would be, through all changes, the outward reflection of a clear self-recognising spirit”.⁶

Indeed, according to Sri Aurobindo, such is the case with nearly all forms of the English cultural expression. As far as British art is concerned, we discover “some remarkable lacunae”. Again, “English music is a zero, English sculpture an unfilled void, English architecture hardly better; English painting, illustrated by a few great names, has been neither a great artistic tradition nor a powerful cultural force and merits only a casual mention by the side of the rich achievements of Italy, Spain, France, Holland, Belgium.”⁷ The same is, more or less, true of English philosophy and English science. As Sri Aurobindo continues to say, “we find great individual philosophers, but no great philosophic tradition, two or three remarkable thinkers, but no high fame for thinking, many of the most famous names in science, but no national scientific culture”. Still, he is fair

1. Ibid., p. 63.

2. Ibid., p. 63.

3. Ibid., pp. 63-64.

4. Ibid., p. 64.

5. Ibid., p. 64.

6. Ibid., p. 64.

7. Ibid., p. 64.

enough to concede that there has been remarkable accomplishment in these fields of philosophy and science and "the influence on European thought has been occasionally considerable and sometimes capital".¹ But it is "in the business of practical life" that the English have attained "an unqualified pre-eminence".² Here, in its various spheres, "in mechanical science and invention, in politics, in commerce and industry, in colonisation, travel, exploration, in the domination of the earth and the exploitation of its riches England has been till late largely, sometimes entirely, the world's leader, the shaper of its motives and the creator of its forms".³

Why has this been so? In order to answer this question, Sri Aurobindo traces "this peculiar distribution of the national capacities" to the roots of the racial characteristics of the British people. These racial characteristics are, broadly speaking, made up of a "dominant Anglo-Saxon strain" and "the Scandinavian and Celtic elements." The latter quicken, lighten, give "force, power and initiative" to the former. However, it is this distinctive mixture which has made the British national mind "remarkably dynamic and practical, with all the Teutonic strength, patience, industry" and yet sufficiently liberated from "the Teutonic heaviness and crudity".⁴ This chiefly explains why the English are "easily first in practical intelligence and practical dealing with the facts and difficulties of life"⁵ not, of course, by any "power of clear intellectual thought or by force of imagination or intellectual intuition, but rather by a strong vital instinct, a sort of tentative dynamic intuition".⁶ Hence it is, Sri Aurobindo continues to say, that we have with the British race "no spirituality, but a robust ethical turn; no innate power of the word, but a strong turn for action; no fine play of emotion or quickness of sympathy, but an abundant energy and force of will".⁷ All this is chiefly the result of the Teutonic Anglo-Saxon strain. But we must not forget at the same time that there is another element of the national

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 65.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

mind—"the submerged, half-insistent Celtic, gifted with precisely the opposite qualities, inherent spirituality, the gift of the word, the rapid and brilliant imagination, the quick and luminous intelligence, the strong emotional force and sympathy, the natural love of the things of the mind and still more of those beyond the mind, left to it from an old forgotten culture in its blood which contained an ancient mystical tradition".¹ And it is from "the ferment of these two elements", that there "arise both the greatness and the limitations of English poetry".²

Having thus analysed the peculiarly complex and mutually counteracting features of the British national mind and their favourable as well as unfavourable impact upon the poetry of such a national mind, Sri Aurobindo rightly says that had the Anglo-Saxon strain been so all-dominating as to refuse to be modified and refined by "the submerged Celtic genius", probably "there might have been no poetical literature at all"³ in the English language. And no wonder, for most of the Teutonic nations have in this field been "conspicuous by their silence or the rarity of their speech".⁴ In Germany, for example, there has been but "a brief period of strong productive culture in which the great names of Goethe and Heine rise out of a mass of more or less vigorous verse talent rather than poetical genius, and after them again silence"⁵ and in the North there has been "the solitary genius of Ibsen".⁶ As to Holland, another Teutonic country, which developed an art of a considerable but a wholly objective power, it "is mute in poetry".⁷ In the face of all this strong evidence to the contrary, if the English national mind or genius has yet been able to produce so much and so constantly poetry of enduring beauty, vigour and charm, it can be safely attributed to the mixture of subtler and more delicate and refined strains, notably the Celtic with all their powers of "inherent spirituality", "quick and luminous intelligence" and "natural love of the things

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

of the mind and still more of those beyond the mind". Also, in the case of the English Teutonic tongue "we have the unique historical accident of the reshaping . . . by French and Latinistic influences which gave it clearer and more flowing forms and turned it into a fine though difficult linguistic material sufficiently malleable, sufficiently plastic for poetry to produce her larger and finer effects, sufficiently difficult to compel her to put forth her greatest energies".¹

Nevertheless, the presence of the sufficiently dominant Teutonic characteristic in the British blood, has given English poetry certain well-defined and strongly-formed features which are difficult to remove even with one's best efforts. Here we may quite naturally and inescapably expect "the groundwork to be a strong objective poetry, a powerful presentation of the forms of external life, action and character in action, the pleasant or the melancholy outsides of Nature, the robust play of the passions, a vigorous vital and physical verse".² That this is so is well corroborated, with apt illustrations, by John Livingstone Lowes who also refers to this virile Teutonic aspect of English poetry when he says:

"...from 'Beowulf' down to the 'Barrack Room Ballads' a splendidly robust and virile strain has run through English poetry. Think of a few of the many names 'Beowulf' itself, the Romances and the Ballads, 'The Canterbury Tales', 'Gammer Gurton's Needle', first and second 'Henry IV', Ben Jonson's Comedies, Dryden's Satires, 'Tam O' Shanter' and the 'Jolly Beggars', 'Don Juan', the 'Biglow Papers', 'Leaves of Grass'. Common to all of them, despite their infinite array of differences, is a masculine energy that never overlooks the mass in the detail. Ornament, prettiness, finesse are secondary qualities; boldness of conception, frankness of delineation, directness of speech are their distinctive marks. They are less concerned with moonlight and with skylarks and with enamels and cameos, than with men and their affairs. They deal with action rather than with objects; they are dynamic rather than static. . . ."³

If, therefore, in course of the development of English

1. Ibid., p. 68.

2. Ibid., p. 68.

3. Chapter on 'The Anglo-Saxon tradition' in *Convention and Revolt in Poetry*, pp. 313-14.

poetry we come across "a self-styled Augustan age which would . . . indulge with a self-satisfied contentment in a 'criticism' of external life, the poetry of political and ecclesiastical controversy, didactic verse, satire"¹, we need not feel surprised at such a phenomenon, nor need one feel apologetic for the presence in its romanticism of "the external Teutonic kind, sensational and outward, appealing to the life and the senses, (and) not the delicate and beautiful, the imaginative and spiritual Celtic romanticism"². Also we should expect to meet with "much poetical thinking and even poetical philosophy of a rather obvious kind . . . vigorous, prompt and direct, or robustly powerful, but not the finer and subtle poetical thought which comes easily to the clear Latin intellect"³. And as regards poetic form and style, the best that we may hope to come across in the poetry of such a dominant national characteristic is a form which is "at best bright and plain or strongly balanced"⁴ but not "those greater forms in which a high and deep creative thought presides or the more exquisite forms which a delicate sense of beauty or a subtle poetic intuition creates . . . a boldly forcible or a well-beaten energy of speech and much of the more metallic vigours of verse" but not "the greater and more profound and the subtler intensities of style and rhythm"⁵.

In any case, it is this side of the English national mind which "would prepare us for English poetry as it was until Chaucer and beyond, the ground-type of the Elizabethan drama, the work of Dryden and Pope, the whole mass of eighteenth-century verse, Cowper, Scott, Wordsworth in his more outward moments, Byron without his Titanism and unrest, the poetry of Browning" and for these "we must not go outside the Anglo-Saxon temperament"⁶.

The Celtic element, however, imparts to this dominant temperament "a potent alchemy of transformation" which "comes up in a blaze of colour, light, emotion, and imaginative magic; in a hungering for beauty in its more subtle and delicate sensuous forms, . . . in a

1. *F. P.*, p. 59.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

subtler romance; in a lyrical intoxication".¹ It also generates at times "a higher urge of thought".² True, it is different from "the fine, calm and measured poetical thinking of the Greeks and the Latin races".³ But certainly, here is "an excitement of thought seeking for something beyond itself and behind life through the intensities of poetical sight".⁴ Also "it brings in a look upon Nature which pierces beyond her outsides and external spirit and lays its touch on the mysteries of her inner life".⁵ What is more, "it awakens rare outbreaks of mysticism, a vein of subtler sentiment, a more poignant pathos; it refines passion from a violence of the vital being into an intensity of the soul, modifies vital sensuousness into a thing of imaginative beauty by a warmer aesthetic perception".⁶ And in language and music "it is always a quickening and refining force; where it can do nothing more, it breathes a more intimate energy and, where it gets its freer movement, creates that intensity of style and rhythm, that force of imaginative vision and that peculiar beauty of turn which are the highest qualities of English poetry".⁷ Matthew Arnold in his *Study of Celtic Literature*, 1867, also points to the Celtic source of some of the finer elements in English poetry when he says:

"If I were asked when English poetry got these three things, its turn for style, its turn for melancholy, and its turn for natural magic, for catching and rendering the charm of nature in a wonderfully clear and vivid way,—I shall answer with some doubt, that it got much of its turn for style from a Celtic source, with less doubt, that it got much of its melancholy from a Celtic source; with no doubt at all, that from a Celtic source it got nearly all its natural magic."⁸

We may observe here that unlike Arnold, Sri Aurobindo has little doubt of any kind about these points; also, he explores the Celtic sources of English poetry

1. Ibid., p. 70.

2. Ibid., p. 70.

3. Ibid., p. 70.

4. Ibid, p. 70.

5. Ibid, p. 70.

6. Ibid., pp. 70-71.

7. Ibid., p. 71.

8. Quoted in Herbert Read's anthology called *The English Vision*, Routledge & Sons, London, 1939, p. 270.

with greater comprehension, insight and depth than Arnold and shows how much of the greater and profounder possibilities which still lie untapped or insufficiently realised in English poetry have their roots and powers in these finer sources. The way in which Sri Aurobindo has emphasised the paramount importance of the Celtic element in English language and poetry is, I believe, unequalled by any other writer or critic on the subject.

The facts being so, Sri Aurobindo says that "there are evidently two opposite powers at work in the same field...."¹ Referring to the peculiar racial blending of the English people, Matthew Arnold also hints at this tension of the two opposite racial characteristics, when he says :

"The Englishman, in so far as he is German,—and he is mainly German,—proceeds in the steady-going German fashion . . . but, in so far as he is Celtic, he has snatches of quick instinct which often make him feel he is fumbling, show him visions of an easier, more dexterous behaviour, disconcert him and fill him with misgiving. No people, therefore, are so shy, so self-conscious, so embarrassed as the English, because two natures are mixed in them, and natures which pull them such different ways."²

But unlike Sri Aurobindo, Arnold points to this conflict of powers to emphasise the singularity, even oddness of the English people :

"The Germanic part, indeed, triumphs in us . . . but not so wholly as to exclude hauntings of Celtism, which clash with our Germanism, producing, as I believe, our *humour*, neither German nor Celtic, and so affect us that we strike people as odd and singular, not to be referred to any known type, and like nothing but ourselves."³

However, what strikes Sri Aurobindo about the peculiarity of the English race is not its singularity or oddness but uniqueness. Also, it is not with any sense of lightness but utmost gravity and seriousness, and, —shall we, therefore, take it?—greater depth and penetration that he brings out the substantially complex and richly potential stuff of which the English people are made, though outwardly they seem to be made of contradictory and mutually opposed elements.

1. *F. P.* p. 71.

2. *Op. cit.*, quoted in Herbert Read's *The English Vision*, p. 186.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 186-187.

But when "two such opposites can coalesce, seize each other's motives and become one, the very greatest achievement becomes possible".¹ We notice here that Courthope in the first volume of his *A History of English Poetry*, also expresses more or less the same idea. He says: "...the secret of poetical, as of every kind of life, lies in the union of opposite principles."² So he affirms that "the greatest things in English poetry have come where this fusion was effected in the creative mind and soul of the poet".³ But then it is evident enough that this fusion is not always possible and hence there arises in English poetry, "an uncertainty of motive, an unsureness of touch, an oscillation".⁴ It does not, of course, prevent great triumphs of poetic power but, it does prevent a high equality and sustained perfection of self-expression and certainty of form".⁵

And it is this uncertainty of motive and form which is chiefly responsible, according to Sri Aurobindo, for "the abrupt starts and turns of the course of English poetry, its want of conscious continuity".⁶ This is something quite in contrast to the external life of the nation, which has always been "faithful to its inner motive and spirit and escaped from the shattering and suddenly creative changes that have at once afflicted and quickened the life of other peoples".⁷

A brief outline of such abrupt starts and turns in the course of English poetry is lucidly given by Sri Aurobindo thus :

"We...mark off first the early English poetry which found its solitary greater expression in Chaucer; (and) it marks itself off by an absolute exhaustion and cessation. The magnificent Elizabethan outburst has another motive, spirit, manner of expression, which seems to have nothing to do with the past, it is self-born under the impulse of a new age and environment. As this dies away, we have the lonely figure of Milton with his strenuous effort at an intellectual poetry cast in the type of the ancients. The age which succeeds is that of a trivial intellectuality which does not follow the lead of Milton and

1. *F. P.*, p. 71.

2. *Op. cit.*, p. 10.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

4. *F. P.*, pp. 71-72.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

is the exact contrary of the Elizabethan form and spirit, the thin and arid reign of Pope and Dryden. Another violent breaking away, a new outburst of wonderful freshness gives us the poetry of Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Blake with another spirit and another language of the spirit. The Victorian period did not deny their influences, it felt them in the form of its work, and we might have expected it to have gone forward with what had been only a great beginning that did not arrive at its full fruition. But it did nothing of the kind, it deviated into a new way which has nothing to do with the finer spirit of the preceding poets and fell off into an intellectual, artistic, carefully wrought but largely external poetry. And now we have this age which is still trying to find itself, but in its most characteristic tendencies seems to be a rejection of the Victorian forms and motives."¹

Sri Aurobindo's perception of the unpredictable and inconsistent and invariably experimental nature of the course of English poetry, moving under the pressure of a sense of "revolt" rather than any conscious feeling for a unifying "convention" or binding "tradition" has in it a force of conviction and sureness of understanding, not usually found in books on the history of English poetry. What is more, he also sees a clear and significant meaning behind the outward vagaries and novelties of English poets, and it is a meaning which concerns humanity itself.

The fact is that Sri Aurobindo does not regard "these reversals and revolutions of the spirit" as a defect in themselves; on the contrary, he even holds that revolutions are "often good for the human soul; for they bring a rapid opening of new horizons".² As such, he feels, that such a phenomenon simply means that "English poetical literature has been a series of bold experiments, less shackled by the past than in countries which have a stronger sense of cultural tradition".³ In any case one cannot fail to see here that the individual poetic genius finds a free field to work on and boldly follows "its own line of poetic adventure".⁴ This is certainly one of the greatest compensatory advantages which the English poetic artist possesses in the face of whatever other

1. Ibid., pp. 72-73.

2. Ibid., p. 73.

3. Ibid., p. 73.

4. Ibid., p. 73.

limitations he has inevitably to reckon with and contend against on the score of the peculiar nature and constitution of the English national temperament. And this spirit of adventure "brings, when it does succeed, new revelations".¹ Indeed, as Sri Aurobindo points out, "English poetry is full of such new revelations"² and "its richness, its freshness. . . its fire and force of imagination, its lambent energy of poetic speech, its constant self-liberation into intensest beauty of self-expression"³ are the rich dividends which it has earned all through these centuries of its dynamic, daring life. And what is more, these lead to "possibilities which are of the highest importance to the poetry of the future".⁴

As already indicated, one constant tendency of English poetry is that it "loves to dwell with all its weight upon the preservation of life and action, of feeling and passion".⁵ So strong is this tendency that we need not feel any surprise if in the entire course of its movement and growth, "strong hold upon this life, the earth-life", keeps on a steady possession of it. On the other hand, "the pure Celtic genius leans towards the opposite extreme, seems to care little for the earth-life for its own sake, has little hold on it, or only a light and ethereal hold, accepts it as a starting-point for the expression of other-life, is attracted by all that is hidden and secret".⁶ But as the English mind naturally and strongly looks at and loves life for its own sake, in all its externalities, so "even when it is strongly attracted by other motives, the intellectual, the aesthetic, or the spiritual, it seldom follows these with a completely disinterested fidelity, but comes back with them on the external life and tries to subject them to its mould".⁷ There are exceptions, no doubt. Blake refuses to be so dominated, and "Keats and Shelley and Wordsworth have their hearts elsewhere".⁸ But how can one deny that "it is a constant power" and "it attracts even the poets who have not a real genius for it and vitiates their work by the immixture of an alien

1. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 74-75.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

motive"?¹ In English poetry the attempt usually and constantly is "to be or at least to appear true to the actual lines of life, to hold up a mirror to Nature"² and it is "the mirror then which has to do the poetising of life; the vital, the imaginative, the emotional temperament of the poet is the reflecting medium and it has to supply unaided the creative and poetical element".³ But "the illusion of external reality, of an "imitation" of Nature is created—the illusion which has been for so long a first canon of Western artistic conceptions,—and the English mind which carries this tendency to an extreme, feels then that it is building upon the safe foundation of the external and the real; it is satisfied of the earth even when it is singing in the heavens".⁴

Now "this sole reliance in the temperament of the poet has certain strong results".⁵ For one thing, it gives "an immense importance to individuality, much greater than that which it must always have in poetical creation: the transformation of life and Nature in the individuality becomes almost the whole secret of this poetry".⁶ No wonder, then, if we find that English poetry is "much more powerfully and consciously personal and individual than that of any other language, aims much less directly at the impersonal and universal".⁷ We find that John Livingstone Lowes also holds the same view when he says: "From its very beginnings English poetry has embodied a superb individualism".⁸ And naturally enough, "the individual subjective element creates enormous differences between the work of poets of the same age".⁹ They cannot, of course, altogether "escape from the common tendencies", but then they hardly fail to "give to them a quite independent turn and expression, subordinate them to the assertion of the individuality".¹⁰ And whatever heightening or intensity of tone and style is to be found in them comes "almost entirely from the

1. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

8. *Op. cit.*, p. 340.

9. *F. P.*, p. 77.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

individual response in the poet, his force of personal utterance, his intensity of personal vision".¹

Sri Aurobindo sums up his points about the basic character and constitution of English poetry by making the following observation :

"Three general characteristics emerge. The first is a constant reference and return of the higher poetical motives to the forms of external life, as if the enriching of the life were its principal artistic aim. The second is a great force of subjective individuality and personal temperament as a leading power of the poetic creation. The third is a great intensity of speech and ordinarily of a certain kind of direct vision."²

Now, says he, if we cast a glance at the world's literature generally, we shall observe that "these are the tendencies that have been on the increase and two of them at least are likely to be persistent".³ "There is everywhere", he continues, "a considerable stressing of the individual subjective element, a drift towards making the most of poet's personality, an aim at a more vivid response and the lending of new powers of colour and line from within to the vision of life and Nature, a search for new intensities of word and rhythm which will translate into speech a deeper insight".⁴ And so far as the chief disability of the English mind, -- "its inability to follow the higher motives disinterestedly to their deepest and largest creative results"⁵ -- is concerned, Sri Aurobindo has this encouraging and hopeful thing to tell us that "this is being remedied by new influences", for "the entrance of the pure Celtic temperament into English poetry through the Irish revival is likely to do much; the contribution of the Indian mind in work like Tagore's may act in the same direction".⁶ These "new influences" were chiefly at work upon English poetry at the time when Sri Aurobindo was writing on the subject in *The Arya*; other refining and subtilising influences from France, from America, China and Japan, not to speak of India, have continued to show their good results since then, thereby enabling the English language and its poetry

1. Ibid., p. 77.

2. Ibid., p. 77.

3. Ibid., p. 77.

4. Ibid., pp. 77-78.

5. Ibid., p. 78.

6. Ibid., p. 78.

to fulfil the promise of the future.

As a result of these new impacts and influences, Sri Aurobindo feels, "the natural powers of the English spirit will be of the highest value to the future poetry. For that poetry is likely to move to the impersonal and universal, not through the toning down of personality and individuality, but by their heightening to a point where they are liberated into the impersonal and universal expression".¹ Then again "the high intensity of speech which English poetry has brought to bear upon all its material, its power of giving the fullest and richest value to the word and the image, is needed for the expression of the values of the spiritual, which will be one of the aims of a higher intuitive utterance".² The new development which we observe as taking place in this poetry at the time did not make him doubt that the time would come when it might "achieve clear and powerful forms of a new intuitive utterance in which the Anglo-Celtic spirit will find its highest self-expression".³ At any rate, according to Sri Aurobindo, it has not only not exhausted all its possibilities but got to find and command yet "the richest powers, the highest and greatest spirit".⁴

On reading these lucid and acute observations of Sri Aurobindo on the general nature and characteristics of English poetry as a whole, one cannot fail to be impressed again by the large as well as deep unity of vision with which he looks at this complex, even bewildering subject. Also, this is a subject where one's own national sentiments and prejudices may prevent one from getting a just and impartial, objective and detached view. The Indian nationality and culture and the Indian literary tradition to which Sri Aurobindo himself belonged are things which are considerably different from the British. But he succeeded in disciplining his mind and literary as well as cultural outlook to such an appreciable extent that he did not have much difficulty in taking an unbiased view of the English character and English literature. His fourteen years' stay in England during the most impressionable period of his life and his having the experience of the English national life and the English literary heritage at very close quarters also helped him

1. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

in obtaining a direct, intimate, subtle and sympathetic understanding of the English national temperament and the English poetic genius. At the same time, we are not to forget that when he made these remarks he had already acquired a considerable spiritual vision and understanding and an inner spiritual discipline which could see the truth even behind things apparently strange and remote. The English life, temperament and literature were, however, not alien or remote to him. No wonder, if his views here strike us as eminently true and profound, even original. These are not merely flattering to the English ears. I understand, every serious-minded Englishman, who is conscious of his own literary heritage, will share them and may even feel inspired by them and to the English poets of today and tomorrow, these may veritably serve as a challenge as well. Sri Aurobindo would have them not only see very clearly the richly diverse and complex poetical heritage to which they belong and which they carry forward, its varied, vigorous as well as delicate and subtle, outward and inward achievements so far, but also realise distinctly the true and enduring lines of its future growth. This is one of the principal reasons why he wrote his series of articles on poetry with special reference to the English poetical genius and its achievement. What is more, he also clearly hints at the fact that it is the question of the evolution and the future of not only English poetry but the poetic consciousness of future humanity itself. As already suggested, the problem of the future of English poetry is closely linked up with that of world's poetry and its future. Though an Indian by birth and race, and, at one time an ardent nationalist, Sri Aurobindo is cosmopolitan enough to see that the key to the cultural future of the present-day humanity lies with the English language and not with any of the Indian languages, as far as the expression of this culture is to be made through poetry. No doubt, for this to be possible, the English race will have to shed much of its insularity and national pride, and be receptive enough chiefly through the Celtic element of their national temperament to take in and genuinely assimilate the deeper and more sustaining influence of the spiritual culture which the Indian race and Indian languages and literatures have been able to acquire and store all these ages of their ancient life and development. His integrally sound and large and powerfully inspiring vision is made clear to us when

he visualises at some future date the genuinely synthetic and supra-nationally intermingled streams of the best in the poetical-cultural genius of the East and the poetical-cultural genius of the West flowing together in one tremendous harmony of movement, carrying the future humanity along ever-rising and ever-brightening crests of the splendours of the Spirit incarnating themselves through the new poetic consciousness and its linguistic expression.

Of course, Sri Aurobindo's observations here may be questioned and even sceptically recognised. The English critics themselves may not quite agree with him and even deny the validity of his analysis of the English racial characteristics and their impact upon the English language and the English poetic genius and its different phases of development. But the fact that these views deserve serious consideration cannot be questioned.

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Chapter 11

THE EVOLUTION OF ENGLISH POETRY

The field which poetry covers is common ground everywhere, yet, as Sri Aurobindo says, and as we have seen in the last chapter, "each nation has its own characteristic spirit and creative quality which determine the province in which it will best succeed, the turn or angle of its vision and the shape of its work."¹ In the case of English poetry we have already seen how its characteristic spirit is complex enough, being a blending of at least two dominant, though opposite strains, namely, the Anglo-Saxon and the Celtic, and frequently subject to outside cultural as well as linguistic influences. Naturally, says Sri Aurobindo, the English poetical genius was "predestined by the complexity of its spirit and its union of opposite powers to an adventurous consecutive seeking over the whole field."² In the beginning, "its limitations point to a more facile success in the concrete or imaginative presentation of life, a more difficult success in the intellectual or spiritual interpretation of life, while most difficult of all for it would be a direct presentation of the things beyond, of mystic realities or of the higher truths of the spirit".³ And so "if this difficulty could once be overcome, then because of the profounder intensity of the power of poetical speech which this literature has developed, the very highest expression of these things would be possible. . . . (for) the depths, the vistas of suggestion, the power to open the doors of the infinite are already there for the mind richly gifted to evoke and use for the highest purposes."⁴

All these powers and potentialities have not, however, been accomplished easily, but only after much effort and seeking. The general course of development which English poetry has followed all these years is outlined by Sri Aurobindo thus :

"It began by a quite external, a clear and superficial

1. *F. P.*, p. 80.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

substance and utterance. It proceeded to a deeper vital poetry, a poetry of the power and beauty and wonder and spontaneous thought, the joy and passion and pain, the colour and music of Life, in which the external presentation of Life and things was thus taken up, but exceeded and given its full dynamic and imaginative content. From that it turned to an attempt at mastering the secret of the Latins, the secret of a clear, measured and intellectual dealing with life, things and ideas. Then came an attempt, a brilliant and beautiful attempt to get through Nature and thought and the mentality in life and Nature and their profounder aesthetic suggestion to certain spiritual truths behind them. This attempt could not come to perfect fruition, partly because there had not been the right intellectual preparation or a sufficient basis of spiritual knowledge and experience and only so much could be given as the solitary individual intuition of the poet could by a sovereign effort attain, partly because after the lapse into an age of reason the spontaneous or the intenser language of spiritual poetry could not always be found or, if found, could not be securely kept. So we get a deviation into another age of intellectual, artistic or reflective poetry with a much wider range, but less profound in its roots, less high in its growth; and partly out of this, and partly by a recoil from it has come the turn of recent and contemporary poetry which seems at last to be approaching the secret of the utterance of profounder truth with its right magic of speech and rhythm."¹

This, in its concise and precise manner, is a very good summing-up of the various periods of English literary history, conventionally labelled as the age of Chaucer, the age of Shakespeare, the age of Milton, the age of Dryden and Pope, the age of the great Romantics, the age of the Victorians, the age of the Moderns, or the 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries in English literature.

The first definite starting-point of English poetry is to be found in the poetry of Chaucer when "the rough poverty of the Anglo-Saxon mind first succeeded in assimilating the French influence and refining and clarifying by that its speech and its aesthetic sense".² This incidentally, but significantly enough, points to an

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

important aspect of the nature of development of English poetry. As at this starting-point of its movement in the poetry of Chaucer, so "at each important turn, or at least on the first three occasions of a new orientation, it had had thus to go to school, to make almost a fresh start under the influences of a foreign culture and poetry, needing, in spite of so much poetic originality and energy and genius a strong light of suggestion from outside to set it upon its way".¹ Indeed, as far as the English poetry is concerned, the process of the taking in of "the influences of a foreign culture and poetry" goes to such an extent that "we have a remodelling of the whole plan under foreign teaching".² For example, Chaucer reorientates English poetry with the help of the models of French romance and the work of Italian masters, but the Elizabethans start afresh, as it were, depending greatly upon quite new Renaissance influences drawn from France, Italy and also, to a certain extent, from Spain. When Milton comes on the scene, he turns his back upon these influences and what the Elizabethans had made of them, but went "direct to classical models"; on the other hand, the writers of the Restoration period and the 18th century "take pliantly the pseudo-classical form from the contemporary French poets and critics".³ And in this way, the process goes on varying from one foreign influence to another, thereby greatly enriching and even complicating, in a sense, the movement of the stream of English poetry.

But this should not make us think, says Sri Aurobindo, that the history of English poetry is one of complete foreign domination at its important and decisive turnings. On the contrary, the truth is that "this dependence is only in externals; in the essential things of poetry, some native character prevails, a new turn is rapidly given, original power and method emerges...."⁴ For the dynamic vitality of the race has ever been "too great not to arrive almost at once at a transmutation".⁵

As such, it is not surprising to find that the first early motive and style of English poetry as it emerges in Chaucer

1. Ibid., p. 83.

2. Ibid., p. 83.

3. Ibid., p. 83.

4. Ibid., p. 83.

5. Ibid., p. 83.

“strikes at once an English note”.¹ “The motive is the poetic observation of ordinary human life and character—without any preoccupying ideal, without any ulterior design, simply as it reflects itself in the individual mind and temperament of the poet.... He does not ask himself what is the meaning of all this movement of life or the power in it or draw any large poetic idea from it; he is not moved to interpret life, a clear and happy presentation is his business”.² Also, “Chaucer had learnt ease, grace and force and compactness of expression which French verse had not yet attained. But neither his poetic speech nor his rhythm has anything of the plastic greatness and high beauty of the Italians. It is an easy, limpid and flowing movement, a stream rather than a well,—for it has no depths in it,—of pure English utterance fitted for the clear and pleasing poetic presentation of external life as if in an unsullied mirror...for the most part satisfied with the first primitive power of poetic speech, a subdued and well-tempered even adequacy”.³

Such a beginning of English poetry with its emphasis on the external though poetic presentation of ordinary human life and character in “an easy, limpid and flowing” poetic speech has its own distinctive peculiarity. This differentiates it rather sharply from the poetry of other European nations, which also started more or less with an interest in external life and action; for example, “Greek with the poetry of Homer, Latin with the historical epic of Ennius, French with the feudal romances of the Charlemagne cycle and the Arthurian cycle”.⁴ The difference is to be seen in the fact that in none of the poetry of these races was the artistic aim “simply the observant presentation of Greek or Roman or feudal life”.⁵ On the contrary, we find that “Homer gives us the life of man always at a high intensity of impulse and action and....deals with it as Phidias dealt with the human form when he wished to create a god in marble”.⁶ This is why when we read the Iliad and the Odyssey, “we are not really upon this earth, but on the

1. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

earth lifted into some plane of a greater dynamis of life, and so long as we remain there we have a greater vision in a more lustrous air and we feel ourselves raised to a semi-divine stature".¹ Similarly, says Sri Aurobindo, "Ennius' object was like Virgil's to cast into poetical utterance the spirit of Rome. So the spirit of Catholic and feudal Europe transmutes life and gives in its own way an ideal presentation of it which only misses greatness by the inadequacy of its speech and rhythmic movement and the diffuse prolixity of its form." But Chaucer has no such higher or deeper aim in mind, no "uplifting motive or spirit". "Whether the colour he gives happens to be realistic or romantic, it falls within the same formula. It is the reflecting of an external life with sometimes just a tinge of romantic illumination, in an observing mind that makes itself a shining poetic mirror."²

No wonder, then, if the spirit of English poetry "having thus struck its first strong note, a characteristic English note, having got so as far as the Anglo-Saxon mind refined by French and Italian influence could go in its own proper way...came suddenly to a pause".³ And truly so, for "to have developed upon this line would have been to wander up and down in a cul-de-sac".⁴ English poetry had greater things to do and naturally it had to wait for some time, "for some new light and more powerful impulse to come".⁵ Nevertheless, this stamp of externality and objectivity which Chaucer laid upon English poetry at the beginning of its career and which may be now regarded as something quite "native to the English mind"⁶ has kept on sticking to it for ever and even coming in the way of the greater achievement of some of the notable English poets. We find it, for example, intruding into the Elizabethan drama and preventing it, except in Shakespeare, "from equalling the nobler work of other great periods of dramatic poetry."⁷ "It throws its limiting shade over English narrative poetry, which after its fresh start in the symbolism of the *Faery Queen* and the vital intensity

1. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

of Marlowe ought either to have got clear away from it or at least to have transmuted it by the infusion of much higher artistic motives.”¹ But above all, “it got sadly in the way of Tennyson who yet had no real turn for the reproduction of life, and prevented him from working out the fine subjective and mystic vein which his first natural intuition had discovered in such work as *The Lady of Shalott* and the *Morte d’Arthur*; we have to be satisfied instead with *The Princess* and *Enoch Arden* and the picturesque triviality of *The Idylls of the King*....”² In this way we find that “even poets of real power are being constantly led away by this tendency from the fulfilment of their more characteristic potentialities”.³

However, to continue with our story of the course of English poetry, we see that after the Chaucerian standard had reached the point of exhaustion, “the new light and impulse” came to it from the Renaissance in France and Italy. One thing above all else which the Renaissance movement brought about wherever its influence came to be felt was “the discovery of beauty and joy in every energy of life”.⁴ “The Middle Ages”, says Sri Aurobindo, “had lived strongly and with a sort of deep and sombre force, but, as it were, always under the shadow of death and under the burden of an obligation to aspire through suffering to a beyond; their life is bordered on one side by the cross and on the other by the sword. The Renaissance brings in the sense of a liberation from the burden and the obligation; it looks at life and loves it in excess; it is carried away by the beauty of the body and the senses and the intellect, the beauty of sensation and action and speech and thought....as a power of life. It is Hellenism returning with its strong sense of humanity and things human, *nihil humani alienum*”.⁵

Elizabethan poetry is the fruit and expression of this vitalistic energy and “passion and wonder of life”. So strong is its vitalism and so powerful, even “disorderly and unrestrained” is the expression that it exceeds “the corresponding poetry in other countries” in its sheer exuberance and gusto, chiefly because it had “neither

1. Ibid., pp. 86-87.

2. Ibid., p. 87.

3. Ibid., p. 87.

4. Ibid., p. 88.

5. Ibid., p. 88.

a past traditional culture nor an innate taste to restrain its extravagances".¹ Springing up "in a chaos of power of beauty", it is even "constantly shot up with brilliant threads of intellectual energy, but is not at all intellectual in its innate spirit and dominant character. It is too vital for that, too much moved and excited; for its mood is passionate, sensuous, loose of rein; its speech sometimes liquid with sweetness, sometimes vehement and inordinate in pitch, enamoured of the variety of its notes, revelling in image and phrase...."²

No wonder, if this brilliant Renaissance spirit penetrating through English poetry "bestowed on the nation a new English speech, rich in capacity, gifted with an extraordinary poetic intensity and wealth and copiousness but full also of the disorder and excess of new formation"³ and thereby produced "on the whole the greatest age of utterance,—though not of highest spirit and aim,—of the genius of English poetry".⁴

And yet "this wealthiest age of English poetry bears a certain stamp of defect and failure".⁵ Sri Aurobindo thinks that Elizabethan poetry cannot be said to come up to the standard of excellence attained by the greatest ages of the Greek and Roman poetry. It "fails too short in aesthetic effect....has an inferior burden of meaning, and....no settled fullness of spirit and a less adequate body of forms".⁶ No doubt, "the great magician, Shakespeare, by his marvellous poetic rendering of life and the spell his poetry casts upon us, conceals this general inadequacy"; also, "the whole age which he embodies is magnified by his presence".⁷ Even the lesser figures of the period "catch something of the light....of his glory and appear in it more splendid than they are".⁸ Yet, by whatever standards we judge him, Shakespeare will appear to be "a miracle of poetic force"⁹ and survive "untouched all adverse criticism, not because there are not plenty of fairly large spots in this sun, but because in

1. Ibid., p. 68.

2. Ibid., p. 89.

3. Ibid., p. 89.

4. Ibid., p. 89.

5. Ibid., p. 90.

6. Ibid., p. 90.

7. Ibid., p. 90.

8. Ibid., p. 90.

9. Ibid., p. 90.

any complete view of him they disappear in the greatness of his light".¹ And as regards Spenser and Marlowe, Sri Aurobindo feels that they are "poets of a high order, great in spite of an eventual failure".² But the rest of the Elizabethan writers, according to him, "owe their stature to an uplifting power in the age and not chiefly to their own intrinsic height of genius".³ And so his final evaluation of this period is that the gold of "this golden age of English poetry is often very beautifully and richly wrought, but it is seldom worked into a perfect artistic whole....and there is on the whole more of a surface gold-dust than of the deeper yield of the human spirit".⁴

And strangely enough, says Sri Aurobindo without any doubt, the defect of this glorious poetry "is most characteristic and prominent in that part of it which has been vaunted as its chief title to greatness, its drama".⁵ Shakespeare and Marlowe may be in a class apart but "the rest of the Elizabethan dramatic work is powerful in effect rather than sound and noble in performance. All its vigorous presentation of life has not been able to keep it alive; it is dead or keeps only...the dusty immortality of the libraries, and this in spite of the attention drawn to it in quite recent times...."⁶ Of course, nobody can deny that it has, in a way, "very striking merits". In the words of Sri Aurobindo: "The Elizabethan playwrights were men of a confident robust talent, some of them real genius....using language as a quite new and rich instrument, lavishly, curiously, exulting in its novel capacities of expression.... They have a certain force of verbal creation, the faculty of producing freely a mass of incident and movement, much power of exuberant dialogue....and of putting the language of passions into the mouth of cleverly constructed human figures;...and they had eminently a vigorous turn for the half romantic, half realistic reproduction of life and manners. Especially, it was time in which there was a fresh and vivid interest in life and man and action, in the adventure and wonder and appeal of the mere

1. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

vital phenomenon of living and feeling and thinking, and their work is full of this freshness and interest.”¹

All these factors, it is evident enough, are quite sufficient to produce a great dramatic poetry; and “certainly if we require no more than this, we shall give”, says Sri Aurobindo, “a prominent place to the Elizabethan drama, higher perhaps than to the Greek or any other. But these things are not, by themselves, sufficient for great dramatic creation. Something else is needed for that, which we get in Shakespeare, in Racine, Corneille and Moliere, in Calderon, in the great Greeks, in the Sanskrit dramatists”.² He, therefore, rightly remarks that “these other Elizabethans are rather powerful writers and playwrights than inspired dramatic poets and creators”.³

This naturally obliges Sri Aurobindo to define as clearly and precisely as possible the true nature and purpose of dramatic poetry and he does it with vigour and vision. “Dramatic poetry”, he asserts, “cannot live by the mere presentation of life and action and the passions, however truly they may be portrayed or however vigorously and abundantly.... It must have, to begin with, as the fount of its creation or in its heart an interpretative vision and in that vision an explicit or implicit idea of life and the human being; and the vital presentation which is its outward instrument, must arise out of that harmoniously, whether by a spontaneous creation, as in Shakespeare, or by the compulsion of an intuitive artistic will, as with the Greeks. This interpretative vision and idea have in the presentation to seem to arise out of the inner life of vital types of the human soul or individual representatives of it through an evolution of speech leading to an evolution of action,—speech being the first important instrument, because through it the poet reveals the action of the soul, and outward action and event only the second, important, but less essential, reducible even to a minimum, because by that he makes visible and concrete to us the result of the inner action. In all very great drama the true movement and result is really psychological and the outward action....and the consummating event....are only either its symbol or else its condition of culmination.

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Finally, all this has to be cast into a close dramatic form, a successful weaving of interdependent relations, relations of soul to soul, of speech to speech, of action to action, the more close and inevitable the better, because so the truth of the whole evolution comes home to us...."¹ Also, Sri Aurobindo's feeling is that drama is "the poet's vision of some part of the world-act in the life of the human soul, it is in a way his vision of Karma, in an extended and very flexible sense of the word; and at its highest point it becomes a poetic rendering or illustration of the Aeschylean *drasanti pathein*, 'the doer shall feel the effect of his act', in an inner as well as an outer, a happy no less than an austere significance, whether that effect be represented as psychological or vital....whether the presentation be tragic or comic or tragicomic or idyllic".²

It is quite evident that the conditions required here for true and high dramatic poetry are, as he himself says, "extremely difficult" to fulfil, and for that reason his view is that "the great dramatists are so few in number,—the entire literature of the world has hardly given us more than a dozen".³

It is doubtful whether the large majority of the Elizabethan dramatists understood these subtle and complex conditions of dramatic poetry. As the proper understanding was lacking, so it is not surprising if their actual successful performance came off "only rarely, imperfectly and by a sort of accident".⁴ Even Shakespeare, who carried off the thing so well "seems to have divined these conditions or contained them in the shaping flame of his genius rather than perceived them by the artistic intelligence"⁵ and as to the rest, they have had ordinarily no "light of interpretative vision, no dramatic idea".⁶ No wonder, if "their tragedy and comedy are both oppressively external".⁷ What is more, their tragedy is "irrational" and their comedy has "neither largeness nor subtlety of idea" and both are "mixed together too without any artistic connection such as

1. Ibid., PP.93-94.

2. Ibid., pp. 93-94.

3. Ibid., p. 94.

4. Ibid., p. 95.

5. Ibid., p. 95.

6. Ibid., p. 95.

7. Ibid., p. 95.

Shakespeare manages to give to them so as to justify thoroughly their co-existence".¹ Ben Jonson, no doubt, is an exception and "has the idea of construction but his execution is heavy and uninspired, the work of a robustly conscientious craftsman rather than a creative artist".² Again, the characters of these Elizabethan playwrights are not "living beings working out their mutual Karma, but external figures of humanity jostling each other on a crowded stage, mere tossing drift of the waves of life".

In order to make up for all these defects, they are naturally constrained to "heap up incident and situation and assail us with vehement and often grossly exaggerated speech and passion...almost always overstraining or in some way making too much of (them)...to accumulate in a mass, so as to carry us away, things attractive, things amusing, things striking, things horrible".³ As they are incapable of making "a higher intellectual and imaginative appeal" obviously, they try to get at us "through the nerves and lower emotional being", in which they, no doubt, succeed eminently. The evolution of the action is "theatrical" rather than "poetic" and "the spirit and the psychology melodramatic rather than dramatic".⁴

Sri Aurobindo feels that it is "necessary to emphasise these defects because indiscriminate praise of these poets helps to falsify or quite exclude the just artistic view of the aim of sound dramatic creation"⁵ and what is still worse, imitation of their practice and models "has been the real root of the inefficacy of subsequent attempts in the dramatic form even by poets of great gifts".⁶ It is this more than any other reason which explains "the failure of even a mind which had the true dramatic turn, a creator like Browning, to achieve drama of the first excellence".⁷ Also, we see that even "great poets, poets of noble subjective power, delicate artists, fine thinkers and singers, all, directly they turn to the drama, begin to externalise fatally; they become violent, they

1. Ibid., p. 95.

2. Ibid., p. 95.

3. Ibid., pp. 95-96.

4. Ibid., p. 96.

5. Ibid., p. 96.

6. Ibid., p. 96.

7. Ibid., p. 96.

gesticulate, they press to the action and forget to have an informing thought, hold themselves bound to the idea of drama as a robust presentation of life and incident and passion.... Dryden stumbling heavily through his rhymed plays, Wordsworth of all people, the least Elizabethan of poets, penning with a conscientious dullness his *Borderers*, Byron diffusing his elemental energy in bad blank verse and worse dramatic construction, Keats turning from his unfinished *Hyperion* to wild-school-boy imitation of the worst Elizabethan type, Shelley, even, forgetting his discovery of a new and fine literary form for dramatic poetry to give us the Elizabethan violence of the *Cenci*, Tennyson, Swinburne, even after *Atlanta*, following the *ignis fatuus*, a very flame of fatuity and futility, are all victims of the same hypnotism".¹

So much for Elizabethan dramatic poetry which chiefly aimed at "an expression of the stir of the life-spirit"² and often going quite wild about it. The non-dramatic utterance of this period is, according to Sri Aurobindo, "full of the lyric joy, sweetness or emotion or moved and coloured self-description of the same spirit...of curious and delighted thinking, but little of a high and firm intellectual value".³ This poetry has, without doubt, "great charm and imaginative, emotional or descriptive appeal", but as "culture is still in its imaginative childhood" in this period, it naturally misses "that depth of profounder substance and that self-possessing plenitude of form which are the other characteristics of a rounded artistic creation".⁴ It is the poetry of Spenser whom Sri Aurobindo regards, however, as "the poet of second magnitude of the time",⁵ which provides the best expression of this lyrical joy, sweetness or emotion "in its full abundance".

Thus, altogether, we may say that within its limitations the age of Shakespeare achieved "an unsurpassed splendour of imaginative vitality, vision of the life spirit, and also an unsurpassed intensity of poetical expression".⁶ Here is not merely the holding up of a mirror to life and Nature, but "a moved and excited

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 102-03.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

reception and evocation".¹ There is no doubt whatever, that life itself with all its multiplicity of form and movement and passionate feeling for self-expression throws its impressions in sheer abundance, but, as Sri Aurobindo tells us, "what seizes upon them is a greater and deeper life-force in the poet which is not satisfied with mirroring or just beautifully responding, but begins to throw up at once around them its own rich matter of being and so creates something new, more personal, intimate, fuller of an inner vision, emotion, passion of self-expression. This is the source of the new intensity; it is this impulse towards an utterance of the creative life-power within which drives towards the dramatic form and acts with such unexampled power in Shakespeare; at another extremity of the Elizabethan mind, in Spenser, it gets farther away from the actuality of life and takes its impression as hints only for a purely imaginative creation which has an aim at things symbolic, otherwise revelatory, deeper down in the soul itself, and shadows them out through the magic of romance if it cannot yet intimately seize and still even there the method of the utterance, if not altogether its aim, is the voice of Life lifting itself out into waves of word and colour and image and sheer beauty of sound. Imagination, thought, vision work with the emotional life-mind as their instrument. . . ."²

The result is undoubtedly "great poetry" but there are other powers of the mind which have not yet been mastered, and to get at these is the next immediate step of English poetry. "The way it follows is to bring forward the intellect as its chief instrument, the thought-mind no longer carried along in the wave of life, but detaching itself from it to observe and reflect upon it. We have at first an intermediate manner, that of Milton's early work and of the Carolinean poets, in which the Elizabethan impulse prolongs itself but is fading away under the stress of an increasing intellectuality. This rises on one side into the ripened classical perfection of Milton, falls away in the other through Waller into the reaction in Dryden and Pope."³

We, thus, enter the intellectual and classical age of English poetry, the age of Milton, and subsequently

1. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 111-12.

the age of Dryden and Pope. "The mind of this age", as Sri Aurobindo tells us, "went for its sustaining influence and its suggestive models to Greece, Rome and France."¹ And it would have been an ideal thing, indeed, he suggests, if the qualities of the "intellectual depth and subtlety, the fine classical lucidity and aesthetic taste" which the English poetical genius so far lacked and now came to acquire from the suggestive models of the Greek, Roman and French literatures had been properly combined with "its own masculine force and strenuousness, its strong imagination, its deeper colour and profounder intuitive suggestiveness"², and, thus, "arrived at something new and great to which the world could have turned as another supreme element of its aesthetic culture".³ But unfortunately this was not to be, and "there was instead a breaking away, a decisive rejection, an entirely new attempt with no roots in the past".⁴ And the eventual result of it all was that the preceding structure of poetry was almost completely abolished and "all the muses.... expelled".⁵ As Sri Aurobindo does not hold a high opinion of the kind of poetry which Dryden and Pope, the pseudo-intellectuals, comes to bequeath to English literature, he naturally describes their poetic achievement as nothing better than a "stucco imitation of classical temple, very elegant, very cold and very empty"⁶ in which "the gods of satire and didactic commonplace" were set up. Theirs was "a shrine which was built more like a coffee-house than a sanctuary"⁷ and the "poor final outcome" was nothing more than "a sterile brilliance, a set polished rhetoric".⁸

As a matter of fact, the two phases of Milton's poetry itself show the achievement as well as the limitation of the classical age. "Milton's early poetry", Sri Aurobindo says, "is the fruit of a strong classical intellectuality still touched with the glow and beauty of a receding romantic colour, emotion and vital emotion. Many softer influences have woven themselves together into his language

1. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 113-14.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

and rhythm and been fused in his personality into something wonderfully strong and rich and beautiful. Suggestions and secrets have been caught from Chaucer, Peele, Spenser, Shakespeare, and their hints have given a strange grace to a style whose austerity of power has been nourished by great classical influences; Virgilian beauty and majesty, Lucretian grandeur and Aeschylean sublimity coloured or mellowed by the romantic elements and toned into each other under the stress of an original personality make the early Miltonic manner which maintains a peculiar blending of greatness and beauty not elsewhere found in English verse.”¹ In the minor Carolinean poets, too, we have “some lingering of the colours of the Elizabethan sunset, something of the life-sense and emotional value, but much thinned and diluted”². But finally those lingering Elizabethan splendours “die away into trivialities of the intelligence playing insincerely with the objects of the emotional being”³. Some of this work is even mystical but its quality gets impaired, for, as Sri Aurobindo says, “the opening of an age of intellect was not the time when a great mystical poetry could be created”⁴.

And so at the end of the Miltonic age the change is complete; “colour has gone, sweetness has vanished, song has fallen into a dead hush : for a whole long century the lyrical faculty disappears from the English tongue”⁵. There is only “the grandiose epic chant of Milton” which “breaks the complete silence of genuine poetry”⁶. But then the Milton of the epic fame is one “who has turned away from the richer beauty and promise of his youth, lost the Virgilian accent, put away from him all delicacies of colour and grace and sweetness to express only in fit greatness of speech and form the conception of Heaven and Hell and man and the universe which his imagination had constructed out of his intellectual beliefs and reviewed in the vision of his soul”⁷. Sri Aurobindo hazards the guess that if, instead of writing his epic after the long silence during which he was preoccupied with political

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 114-15.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

questions and controversies of the day, Milton had written it "in a continuity of ripening from his earlier style and vision", he might have produced a work not "quite so great perhaps, but surely something more opulent and otherwise perfect".¹ "As it is, it is by *Paradise Lost* that he occupies his high rank among the poets; that is the one supreme fruit of the attempt of English poetry to seize the classical manner, to achieve a poetical expression disciplined by a high intellectual severity and to forge a complete balance and measured perfection of form."²

Here, to a great extent, Milton succeeded in his aim of giving to English poetic speech "a language of intellectual thought" and "that peculiar grandeur in both the soul and manner of the utterance and in both the soul and the gait of the rhythm which belongs to him alone of poets".³ Also, "there is nowhere any more magnificently successful opening than the conception and execution of his Satan and Hell"⁴; and if the rest had been "equal to the opening, there would have been no greater poem, few as great in literature".⁵ But "here, too, the performance failed the promise".⁶ His *Paradise Lost* "commands admiration, but as a whole, apart from its opening, it has failed....to go home to the heart of the world and lodge itself in its imagination".⁷ Here Sri Aurobindo compares Milton's performance with Dante's and says, "the theology of the Puritan religion was a poor enough aid for so ambitious a purpose, (which was to justify the ways of God to man), but the scriptural legend treated was still quite sufficient poetically if only it had received throughout a deeper interpretation. Dante's theology though it has the advantage of the greater richness of import and spiritual experience of mediaeval Catholicism, is still intellectually insufficient, but through his primitive symbols Dante has seen and has revealed things which make his work poetically great and sufficient. It is here that Milton has failed. Nor is the failure mainly intellectual. It is true that he had not an original intellectuality, his

1. Ibid., p. 116.

2. Ibid., p. 116.

3. Ibid., p. 117.

4. Ibid., p. 117.

5. Ibid., p. 118.

6. Ibid., p. 118.

7. Ibid., p. 118.

mind was rather scholastic and traditional, but he had an original soul and personality and the vision of a poet. To justify the ways of God to man intellectually is not the province of poetry; what it can do, is to reveal them. Yet just here is the point of failure. Milton has seen Satan and Death and Sin and Hell and Chaos....he has not so seen God and heaven or man or the soul of humanity at once divine and fallen, subject to evil and striving for redemption.... In other words, he has ended by stumbling over the rock of offence that always awaits poetry in which the intellectual element becomes too prominent, the fatal danger of a failure of vision".¹

This failure spreads to "all the elements of the later poetry". "His language and rhythm remain unfalteringly great to the end, but they are only a splendid robe and the body they clothe is a nobly carved but lifeless image. His architectural structure is always and greatly and classically proportioned; but structure has two elements or...two methods, that which is thought out and that which grows from an inward artistic and poetic vision. Milton's structures are thought out; they have not been seen, much less lived out into their inevitable measures and free inspired lines of perfection."²

The poetry which followed Milton's is one of "unredeemed intellectuality" and even the rudiments of the genuine poetic inspiration, as Sri Aurobindo understands it, are absent. As he says, "Pope and Dryden and their school, except now and then,...are busy with one aim, with thinking in verse, thinking with a clear force, energy and point or with a certain rhetorical pomp and effectiveness, in a well-turned and well-polished metrical system. That seems to have been their sole idea of "numbers" of poetry, and it is an idea of unexampled falsity."³ He admits that this was "a necessary phase" in the development of English poetry which was almost constrained at that time to sacrifice "many of its native powers in order to learn as best it could how to arrive at the clear and straightforward expression of thought with a just, harmonious and lucid turn...."⁴ But then it cannot be denied that "the sacrifice made was great and cost much effort of recovery

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 118-19.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

to the later development of the language"¹. If they got rid of "the Elizabethan confusion, the involved expression, . . . the crudeness and extravagance", they also sacrificed "all the rich imagination and vision, the sweetness, lyricism, grace and colour" and "replaced it with mere point and false glitter"². They also dismissed "Milton's latinisms and poetic inversions . . . his great and packed turns of speech and replaced his grandeurs by what they thought to be of a noble style, though it was no more than a spurious rhetorical pomp"³. "It took for its model the Augustan poets of Rome, but it substituted for the strength and weight of the Latin manner an exceeding superficiality and triviality. It followed more really contemporary French models, but missed their best ordinary qualities, their culture, taste, tact of expression, and missed too the greater gifts of the classical French poetry . . . it is occupied with expressing thought, but its thought is of little or no value; for the most part it is brilliant commonplace, and even ideas which have depths behind them become shallow and external by way of their expression. The thought of these writers has no real eye on life, except when it turns to satire. Therefore, that is the part of their work which is still most alive; for here the Anglo-Saxon spirit gets back to itself, leaves the attempt at a Gallicised refinement, finds its own robust vigour and arrives at a brutal, but still genuine and sometimes really poetic vigour and truth of expression. Energy, driving force is, however, a general merit of the verse of Pope and Dryden and in this one respect they excel their nearest French examplars. Their expression is striking in its precision, each couplet rings out with a remarkable force of finality . . . (but) it is not gold of poetry for all that, . . . it is well-gilt copper coin of a good currency . . . It has to be read by couplets and passages, for each poem is only a string of these and except in one instance the true classical gift, the power of structure is quite wanting. The larger thought-power which is necessary for structure was absent."⁴ The exception was probably Pope's *Rape of the Lock* which, according to Sri Aurobindo, was something of a "creative" work, but even here "the deeper

1. Ibid., p. 121.

3. Ibid., p. 121.

3. Ibid., p. 121.

4. Ibid., pp. 122-23.

creative founts and the kindlier sources of vision are not there.”¹ It is obvious that Sri Aurobindo has “little temperamental sympathy” with these English Augustan poets, as he frankly said in one of his letters, and yet, seen in the truer objective perspective, the account which he has given here of both their achievements and serious deficiencies, cannot be said to be unduly biased by his temperamental and psychological peculiarities; in any case, his “little temperamental sympathy” with these poets did not prevent him from seeing “their extraordinary perfection or force in their own field, the masterly conciseness, energy, point, metallic precision into which they cut their thought or their verse”.² But there his admiration ends, and he cannot help concluding his impression about “this intellectual age of English poetry” by saying that though it no doubt did what it had to do effectively, “with talent, energy and even a certain kind of genius”³ yet it “ended in a failure and for a time even a death of the true poetic faculty”.⁴ Indeed, this was but inevitable, as it meant for English poetry “a departure from what is best in the national mind”.⁵

In the scale of evolution English poetry had thus reached, according to Sri Aurobindo, the “downward curve” of a “dry and brazen intellectualism”.⁶ This gives him an opportunity to express something of his vision of the way the law of evolution works “in the things of the mind no less than in the movements of life” and also make some general reflections upon the art of poetry itself. He says that when such a descent, unfortunately, takes place either in life or in the realm of art and thought, there occurs at the end either its extinction altogether or “some violent revulsion” to give it a new push and fresh lease of life in a quite new direction. What is more, “this saving revulsion, if it comes, is likely, if bold enough, to compensate for the past prone descent by an equally steep ascension to an undreamed-of novelty of illumined motive and revealing spirit”⁸ and so “these

1. *L* 3, p. 204.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 265-66.

3. *F. P.*, p. 121.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

falls are,—when the needed energy is within,—an obscure condition for unprecedented elevations”.¹ “In the recoil”, continues Sri Aurobindo, “. . . some discovery is made which would otherwise have been long postponed or not at all have arrived”²; on the other hand, “it is a constant disadvantage of these revolutions which are in fact forced rapidities of evolution—that they carry in them a premature light and an element of quick unripeness by which a subsequent reaction and return to lower levels becomes inevitable, because the contemporary mind is not wholly ready. . . .”³

The deep psychological truth behind this observation is clearly applicable to the new turn which English poetry took in the 19th century. It was, at the beginning, a really “swift and far-reaching upward curve” which pulled it “from the hard and glittering, well-turned and well-rhymed intellectual superficialities of a thin pseudo-classicism” and, as it were, rocketed it to “its second luminous outbreak of sight and inspiration”.⁴

This was really inevitable, for, as Sri Aurobindo feels, “poetry even when it is dominated by intellectual tendency and motive, cannot really live and work by intellect alone; it is not created nor wholly shaped by reason and judgment, but is an intuitive seeing and an inspired hearing”.⁵ And intuition and inspiration being “the characteristic means of all spiritual vision and utterance”, they are bound to be like the “rays from a greater and intenser Light than the tempered clarity of our intellectual understanding”.⁶ It is the law of Nature that “every power in the end finds itself drawn towards its own proper home and own highest capacity”⁷ and so the spiritual faculties of hearing and seeing—upon which, according to Sri Aurobindo, the art of poetry ultimately and truly depends—“must climb at last to the expression of things spiritual and eternal and their power and working in temporal things and must find in that interpretation their own richest account. . . . purest

1. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

came of native capacity".¹ Therefore, "when the eye of the poet has seen life externally or with a more vital inwardness, has risen to the clarities and widenesses of a thought which intimately perceives and understands it, when his word has caught some revealing speech and rhythm of what he has seen, much has been seized, but not the whole possible field of vision; this other and greater realm still remains open for a last transcendence".²

This is the large angle of evolutionary vision of the poetic art from which Sri Aurobindo looks upon the outburst of the new and deeper Romanticism of the fourth turn of the course of English poetry. According to him it is here that "we get for the first time in occidental literature, some falling of this higher light upon the poetic mind,—except in so far as the ancient poets had received it through myth and symbol or a religious mystic here and there attempted to give his experience rhythmic and imaginative form. But here there is the first poetic attempt of this intellectual faculty striving at the height of its own development to look beyond its own level directly into the unseen and the unknown and to unveil the ideal truth of its own highest universal conceptions.... Blake, Shelley, Wordsworth were first explorers of a new world of poetry other than that of the ancients or of the intermediate poets...."³

Some of the motives which led up to this new poetry are, of course, "already visible in the work of the middle eighteenth century".⁴ "There is, first, a visible attempt to break quite away from the prison of the formal metrical mould, rhetorical style, limited subject-matter, absence of imagination and vision.... Poets like Gray, Collins, Thomson, Chatterton, Cowper seek liberation by a return to Miltonic blank verse and manner, to the Spenserian form,—an influence which prolonged itself in Byron, Keats, and Shelley,—to lyrical movements, but more prominently the classical ode form.... the Shakespearean wealth of language or of the softer, more pregnant colour of the pre-Restoration diction and to modify it to suit the intellectualised treatment of thought and life which was now an indispensable element.... Especially, there is the beginning of a direct gaze of the poetic

1. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 127-28.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

intelligence and imagination upon life and Nature and of another and a new power in English speech, the poetry of sentiment as distinguished from the inspired voice of sheer feeling or passion. But all these newer motives are only incipient and unable to get free expression because there is still a heavy weight of the past intellectual tradition. Rhetoric yet loads the style....verse form tends to be still rather hard and external or else ineffective in its movement; the native lyric note has not yet returned, but only the rhetorical stateliness of the ode, not lyricised as in Keats and Shelley, or else lyrical forms managed with only an outward technique but without any cry in them. Romanticism is still rather of the intellect than in the temperament, sentiment runs thinly and feebly and is weighted with heavy intellectual turns. Nature and life and things are seen accurately as objects and forms, but not with any vision, emotion or penetration into the spirit behind them.”¹

It is in Burns that “these new-born imprisoned spirits break out from their bounds and get into a free air of natural, direct and living reality, find a straightforward speech and a varied running or bounding movement of freedom”.² This, according to Sri Aurobindo, is the true importance of Burns apart from the intrinsic merits of his poetry. And yet “his work has its limitations; the language is often too intellectualised to give the lyrical emotion....the view on life is close, almost too close to give the deeper poetic or artistic effect....sometimes only does it suggest to us the subtler something which gives lyrical poetry not only its form and lilt and its power to stir,—all these he has,—but its more moving inmost appeal”.

Turning, next, to the Romantic poetry proper, Sri Aurobindo says: “This new poetry has six great voices who fall naturally in spite of their pronounced differences into pairs, Wordsworth and Byron, Blake and Coleridge, Shelley and Keats. Byron sets out with a strangely transformed echo of the past intellectualism, is carried beyond it by the elemental force of his personality, has even one foot across the borders of the spiritual, but never quite enters into that kingdom. Wordsworth breaks away with deliberate purpose from the past, forces his way into this new realm, but finally sinks under the weight

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 128-30.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

of the narrower intellectual tendencies which he carries with him into its amplitudes. Blake and Coleridge open magical gates, pass by flowering side lines with hedges laden with supernatural blooms into a middle world whence their voices come to us ringing with an unearthly melody. In Shelley the idealism and spiritual impulse rise to almost giddy heights in a luminous ether and are lost there, unintelligible to contemporary humanity, only now beginning to return to us with their message. Keats, the youngest and in many directions the most gifted of these initiators, enters the secret temple of ideal Beauty, but has not time to find his way into the deepest mystic sanctuary. In him the spiritual seeking stops abruptly short and prepares to fall away down a rich sensuous incline to a subsequent poetry which turns from it to seek poetic Truth or pleasure through the senses and an artistic or curiously observing or finely psychologizing intellectualism. This dawn has no noon, hardly even a morning.”¹

This is an admirable summing up of the exact nature of poetic achievement by the notable Romantic poets of the period. In such a short space Sri Aurobindo has given us in essence all that we need to know about them. Their limitations and failures are also precisely and correctly indicated. It is with a deep insight and sureness of comprehension that Sri Aurobindo lays his unerring finger on what they could do and what they failed to do. It is doubtful whether any other critic of Romantic poets has performed such a critical miracle with so much confidence and clarity of perception and vigour and veracity of expression in such a short space.

Sri Aurobindo calls these Romantics “the poets of the dawn”.² They are the poets of the dawn in so far as they distinctly herald the opening of what he calls the modern age in human life, thought and literature. As to the precise nature of what we know as ‘modernity’, Sri Aurobindo says: “From the beginning this modern movement in literature as in thought, takes the form of an everwidening and deepening intellectual and imaginative curiosity, a passion for knowledge, a passion for finding, an eye of intelligence awakened to all the multi-form possibilities of new truth and discovery”.³ Such

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 131-32.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

a movement, then, immediately reminds us of the Renaissance movement of the past. But there is a clear, sharp and profound difference between the two movements. As Sri Aurobindo points out, "The Renaissance was an awakening of the life spirit to wonder and curiosity and reflection and the stirred discovery of the things of the life and the mind; but the fullness of the modern age has been a much larger comprehensive awakening of the informed and clarified intellect to a wider curiosity, a much more extensive adventure of discovery and an insistent need to know and possess the truth of Nature and man and the universe and whatever may lie hidden behind their first appearances and suggestions."¹ What is more, "a long intellectual search for truth that goes probing always deeper into the physical, the vital and subjective... is now beginning to reach beyond these things or rather through their subtlest and strongest intensities of sight and feeling towards the truths of the spirit".² As such, the basic difference between the two movements can be rightly summed up thus: "The soul of the Renaissance was a lover of life and an amateur of knowledge; the modern spirit is drawn by the cult of a clear, broad and minute intellectual and practical Truth; knowledge and a power of life founded on the power of knowledge are the dominating necessities of its being".³ And the Romantic movement in English poetry of the early 19th century was the first distinct poetical attempt in England to follow "intellectually and imaginatively the curve of this great impulse".⁴ Hence, the English Romantic poets are said to be the harbingers of the modern intellectual, imaginative and also intuitive, spiritual age.

But we have already seen that Sri Aurobindo pointed to the limited achievement of these Romantic poets when he said: "This dawn has no noon, hardly even a morning." What he meant to say was that though they happened to usher in a new age, being driven by a new inward impulse of curiosity and exploration, a "sudden, almost unaccountable spiritual impulse",⁵ they could not make a full use of it because they were not yet fully

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 133-34.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

ready for it themselves. This new "spiritual impulse" was really "splendid and supreme in its rare moments of vision and clarity".¹ But they had no clear and firm idea of the greater work demanded from them by this spirit and the result is that "they get it at its best only in an inspiration over which they have not artistic control, and they have only an occasional or uncertain glimpse of its self-motives".² What is more, "they give to it often a form of speech and movement which is borrowed from their intellect, normal temperament or culture rather than wells up as the native voice and rhythm of the spirit within, and they fall away easily to a lower kind of work".³ They have no doubt "a greater thing to reveal than the Elizabethan poets, but they do not express it with that constant fullness of native utterance or that more perfect correspondence between substance and form which is the greatness of Shakespeare and Spenser".⁴

Nevertheless, the peculiarity of this deeply imaginative and 'modern' sensibility of the Romantic poets has not been even clearly understood by their critics; they have been deplorably misunderstood. As Sri Aurobindo remarks: "Taine's grotesquely misproportioned appreciation in which Byron figures as the colossus and Titan of the age while the greater and more significant work of Wordsworth and Shelley is dismissed as an ineffective attempt to poetise a Germanic transcendentalism, Carlye's ill-tempered and dyspeptic depreciation of Keats, Arnold's inability to see in Shelley anything but an unsubstantially beautiful poet of cloud and dawn and sunset....are extreme, but still characteristic misunderstandings".⁵

Sri Aurobindo seems to suggest to us that we fail to understand the peculiarity of the poetic sensibility and imagination of the English Romantic poets because we overlook the psychological truth that each essential motive of poetry "must find its own characteristic speech, its own law of rhythms....its own structure and development in the lyric, dramatic, narrative (or)....the epic form and medium".⁶ "The objective poetry of external

1. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 157-58.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

life, the vital poetry of the life-spirit, the poetry of the intellect or the inspired reason, each has its own spirit and, since the form and word are the measure, rhythm, body of the spirit, each must develop its own body. There may be a hundred variations within the type which spring from national difference, the past of the civilisation, the cultural atmosphere, the individual idiosyncrasy, but some fundamental likeness of spirit will emerge.”¹ And it is on the basis of this deeper psychological theory of poetry that Sri Aurobindo affirms: “A poetry of spiritual vision and the sense of things behind life and above the intellect must similarly develop from its essence a characteristic voice, cry, mould of speech, natural way of development, habits of structure”.²

The Romantic poets of the dawn, being the precursors in English literary history of this “poetry of spiritual vision” were, therefore, expected to develop a similar “characteristic voice, cry, mould of speech...habits of structure” in keeping with this tendency towards spiritual vision. But as they were not quite sure themselves of the new power of vision and speech which they had chanced to come upon, and, what is more, as the time itself was not yet “ready for work of this kind, not prepared for it by any past development, not fitted for it by anything in the common atmosphere of the age”³ we need not feel surprised if we find that each one of them “followed his own way, was very little influenced by the others, was impelled by a quite distinct spiritual idea, worked it out in a quite individual method and, when he fell away from it, or short of it, failed in his own way and by shortcomings peculiar to his own nature”.⁴ There is thus nothing of “that common aim and manner which brings into one category the Elizabethan dramatists or the contemporaries of Pope and Dryden”.⁵ But here, it seems, Sri Aurobindo is trying to emphasise the extreme individuality or peculiarity of the Romantic poets a little too severely and exaggeratedly, and it is rather difficult to accept that there is nothing of a common aim and manner with them which brings them closer together and enables them to form a group of their own,

1. *Ibid.*, p. 159,

2. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 160-61.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

distinct enough from that of the Elizabethans, the Metaphysicals or the Augustans.

However, Sri Aurobindo has some convincing reasons to offer in order to explain the inadequacy of their achievement. For one thing they belonged to "an age of imperfect, unenriched and uncompleted intellectuality".¹ Then again, the language they inherited was, no doubt, admirable for clear and balanced prose speech, but in poetry it had been used "only for adequate or vigorous statement, rhetorical reasoning, superficial sentimentalising or ornate thought.... The forms and rhythmical movements were unsuitable for any imaginative, flexible or subtly feeling poetry".² Both the handicaps were rather formidable. As to the forms and rhythms which they inherited, they decided to discard them and replace them by those old ones which belonged to the earlier masters. They took on the song and the ballad forms of old but "modified or developed" them to suit "a more fluid and intellectualised mind and imagination".³ But, says Sri Aurobindo, "the language was a more difficult problem and could not be entirely solved by such shortcuts as Wordsworth's recipe of a resort to the straightforward force of the simplest speech dependent on the weight of the substance and thought for its one sufficient source of power".⁴ No wonder, we find "the tongue of the period floating between various possibilities. On its lower levels it is weighted down by some remnant of the character of the eighteenth century and proceeds by a stream of eloquence, no longer artificial, but facile, fluid, helped by a greater force of thought and imagination. This turn sometimes rises to a higher level of inspired and imaginative poetic eloquence. But beyond this pitch we have a fuller and richer style packed with thought and imaginative substance, the substitute of this new intellectualised poetic mind for the more spontaneous Elizabethan richness and curiosity...."⁵ On the other hand, "we have a quite different note, a sheer poetical directness, which sometimes sinks below itself to poverty and insufficiency or at least to thinness, as in much of

1. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 164

3. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

5. *Ibid.*, pp., 164-65.

the work of Wordsworth and Byron, but, when better supported and rhythmized, rises to quite new authenticities of great or perfect utterance".¹ And it is out of this that there comes in some absolute moments "a native voice of the spirit". It is such a native voice of the spirit that we see "in Wordsworth's revelations of the spiritual presence in Nature and its scenes and peoples, in Byron's rare forceful sincerities, in the luminous simplicities of Blake, in the faery melodies of Coleridge, most of all perhaps in the lyrical cry and ethereal light of Shelley".² But these are, as Sri Aurobindo says, comparatively rare moments, and "the mass of their work is less certain and unequal in expression and significance".³ Finally, "we get in Keats a turning away to a rich, artistic and sensuous poetical speech which prepares us for the lower fullnesses of the intellectual and aesthetic epoch that had to intervene".⁴ And the result is that "the greatest intuitive and revealing poetry has yet to come".⁵

Though Sri Aurobindo notes with a rather ruthless clarity and unerring critical sharpness the inadequacies and failures of these Romantic poets, he is yet no less subtly discriminating and sympathetically warm in his glowing praise of their rare achievements. This becomes eminently clear when we go through his critical evaluations of Byron, Wordsworth, Blake, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats in the pages⁶ of *The Future Poetry*. These, supplemented by his other acute observations on some of them, particularly Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge, in the third volume of his letters, constitute a rich feast of his critical acumen, taste and powers. Precise and concise, they easily and naturally as well as vigorously and tellingly seize hold of the very soul of their poetry and poetic personality. Indeed, what others have taken volumes to express, and even then have not been able to do adequate justice to them, is accomplished here with almost a sovereign ease and persuasive forcefulness in course of a few paragraphs only, and the reader has the feeling that he has been given all that is necessary to

1. Ibid., p. 165.

2. Ibid., p. 165.

3. Ibid., p. 165.

4. Ibid., p. 165.

5. Ibid., p. 165.

6. Ibid., pp. 165-87.

know about them. These portraiture are a miracle of the art of compressed critical expression and communication, and the language has always a revealing charm and power which illuminate the subject as it goes on casting an immediate as well as lasting spell. Let us take, for instance, the explanation which Sri Aurobindo gives for the loss of Wordsworth's poetical powers in the later years of his life. "His earliest vision of his task was the right vision, and whatever may be the general truth of his philosophy of childhood in the great Ode, it seems to have been true of him. For, as intellectuality grew on him, the vision failed; the first clear intimations dimmed and finally passed, leaving behind an unilluminated waste of mere thought and moralising. But always, even from the beginning, it got into the way of his inspiration. Yet Wordsworth was not a wide thinker, though he could bring a considerable weight of thought to the aid of the two or three great things he felt and saw lucidly and deeply, and he was unfitted to be a critic of life of which he could see only one side with power and originality, - for the rest he belongs to his age rather than to the future and is limited in his view of religion, of society, of men by many walls of convention."¹

The explanation put forward for the inability of both Byron and Wordsworth to reach their highest expressive power is not less striking for its admirable truthfulness and succinctness. The very soul of their poetic personality is flashed out before us, as it were. "Byron, no artist, intellectually shallow and hurried, a poet by compulsion of personality rather than in the native colour of his mind, inferior in all these respects to the finer strain of his great contemporaries, but in compensation a more powerful elemental force than any of them and more in touch with all that had begun to stir in the mind of the time... succeeds more amply on the inferior level of his genius, but fails in giving any adequate voice to his highest possibility. Wordsworth meditative, inward, concentrated in his thought, is more often able by force of brooding to bring out that voice of his greater self, but flags constantly, brings in a heavier music surrounding his few great clear tones, drowns his genius at last in a desolate sea of platitude. Neither arrives at that amplitude of achievement which might have been theirs in a more fortunate time, if ready forms

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 170-71

had been given to them, or if they had lived in the stimulating atmosphere of a contemporary culture harmonious with their personality.”¹

Similarly, his defence of the easily criticisable “moral” passage of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is no less psychologically searching and critically convincing :

“...throughout the ‘Ancient Mariner’ Coleridge is looking at things from the point of view and the state of mind of the most simple and childlike personality possible, the Ancient Mariner who feels and thinks only with the barest ideas and the most elementary and primitive emotions. The lines he writes here record the feeling which such a mind and heart would draw from what he had gone through. Are they not perfectly in place and just in the right tone for such a purpose ?... the tone of the poem is deliberately intended to be that of an unsophisticated ballad simplicity and ballad mentality—it is not the ideas but the extraordinary beauty of rhythm and vividness of vision and fidelity to a certain mystic child-like key that makes it such a wonderful and perfect poem.”²

And yet he is not one who would impose his critical judgment upon others, and would end by saying : “this is of course only a point of view”.³

When Sri Aurobindo turns, next, to the Victorian poets to whom he personally was historically closer for he had finished his academic career in England by 1893—, he once again brings to bear upon them his unerring powers of detached, penetrating judgment and gives us an evaluation which is another triumphant document of that kind of criticism which is the rare product of the play of the powers of the mind and the soul, of intuitive insight and discrimination and intellectual analysis and evaluation.

“The epoch”, he says in a nutshell, “associated in England with the name of Victoria was in poetry, like that of Pope and Dryden, an age of dominant intellectualism; but unlike that hard and sterile period, it has been an imaginative, artistic intellectualism touched with the greater and freer breath of modern thought.... But still whether we compare it with the inspirations from which it turned or with the inspiration which

1. Ibid., pp. 166-67.

2. *L 3.*, pp. 325-26.

3. Ibid., p. 326.

followed and replaced it, it is a depression, not a height, and....leave an impression of a too cramped fullness and a too level curiosity.... There is much in this work to admire, something here and there to stimulate, but only a little that lifts off the feet and carries to the summits of the poetic enthusiasm.... The rich beauty of Keats is replaced by the careful opulent cultivated picturesqueness of Tennyson, the concentrated personal force of Byron by the many-sided robustness and energy of Browning, the intense Nature poetry and the strong and grave ethical turn of Wordsworth by the too intellectually conscious eye on Nature and the cultured moralising of Arnold, the pure ethereal lyricism of Shelley by Swinburne's turgid lyrical surge and all too self-conscious fury of foam-tossing sound, and in place of the supernatural visions of Blake and Coleridge we have the mediaeval glamour and langorous fields of dreams of Rossetti and Morris. There is a considerable gain, but a deep loss... The gain is in the fullness of language, a more conscious and careful art, a more informed and varied range of thought and interest; but the loss is in spiritual substance and the Pythian height of inspiration. There is....a wealth of colour and nearer strain of thinking, but a lower flame of the spirit."¹

We could not have a better account than this of the over-all achievement as well as failure of the Victorian poets and a general comparison between the Augustans, the Romantics and the Victorians.

The Victorians had no doubt a quite impressive facade to their achievement but on the whole Sri Aurobindo does not hold it very high for all its apparent brilliance and his conclusion is that their "period for all its activity and fruitfulness was by no means one of those great intellectual humanistic ages which the world will look back to with a satisfied sense of clarity or of uplifting".² Indeed, "it is the most unlovely and uninspiring period of the English spirit. Never was the aesthetic sense so drowned in pretentious ugliness, seldom the intelligence crusted in such an armoured imperviousness to fine and subtle thinking, the ebb of spirituality so far out and low.... Poetry flourishes best when it is the rhythmic expression of the soul of its age, of what is greatest and deepest in it, but still belongs

1. *F. P.*, pp. 188-190.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

to it, and the poetry of this period suffers by the dull smoke-laden atmosphere in which it flowered; though it profited by the European stir of thought and seeking around....achieved beauty, achieved in one or two poets a considerable energy, some largeness, occasional heights, there is still something sickly in its luxuriance, a comparative depression and poverty in thought, a lack in its gifts, in its very accomplishment a sense of something not done".¹

Then follow excellent critical portraits of the three major Victorian poets, Tennyson, Browning and Arnold, and some penetrating sidelights on Swinburne, Rossetti and Morris. A balance-sheet of their achievements and failures is lucidly and confidently presented with all the powers of critical insight and detachment of which Sri Aurobindo seems to be a sovereign master, coupled with a command over the most expressive, creative critical prose imaginable. The figures thus treated stand out in our mind without any ambiguity or looseness of form and structure, for the carving and chiselling are always unerring, firm, subtle, powerful, and truly organic and they are made to exist in our memory in their body and soul together for ever. What is more, here, for example, is an admirable little specimen of the kind of mnemonic, pithy, analytical criticism advocated as well as felicitously practised by Eliot,—a specimen which gives us a summary, in extreme miniature, of the peculiarities of the major Victorian poets:

"Tennyson voices the conventional English mind, Swinburne a high-pitched cry of revolt or a revolutionary passion of freedom or even for license; Rossetti and Morris take refuge in mediaevalism as they saw it: Arnold strikes out the more serious notes of contemporary thinking. He fails however to look beyond to the future. In one respect of literary craftsmanship he does however anticipate future trends; for he makes a departure towards certain tendencies of modernist forms of verse."²

And this is how he sums up the Victorian period as a whole:

"This is the balance of the Victorian epoch; a considerable intellectual and artistic endeavour, contradicting, over-coming but still hampered by an ungenial atmosphere; two remarkable poets held back from the first greatness,

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 190-192.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

one by imperfection of form, the other by imperfection of substance: four artists of small range, but with work of an accomplished, but over-pitched or thin or langorous beauty; and enrichment and strengthening of the language which makes it more capable of fine and varied and curious thought, and the creation of an artistic conscience which may impose in the future a check on the impulse of an over-abundant energy to imperfection of eager haste and vagary in execution. If the promise of the coming age is fulfilled, it may be remembered as a fine, if limited period of preparation for the discovery of new, more beautiful and grander fields of poetry."¹

The end of the Victorian period marks, historically speaking, the beginning of modern times when we notice "a broadening of the English poetic mind into a full oneness with the great stream of modern thought and tendency, an opening up out of the narrower Victorian insularity to admit a greater strength, subtlety and many-sidedness of the intelligence".² Naturally, "there are experiments of all kinds in language and rhythm and subject and treatment, many notable names each with his special turn and personality, but no supreme decisive speech and no gathering up of the many threads into a great representative work".³ As a matter of fact, "the whole of European literature at the present time is of this character; it is a fluid mass with a hundred conflicting tendencies...which has not yet run into any clear universal mould".⁴ "...it is a period of transition", Sri Aurobindo continues to say, "not yet a new age, but the preparation for a new age of humanity. Everywhere there is a seeking after some new thing, a discontent with...the past, a spirit of innovation, a desire to get at deeper powers of language, rhythm, form, because a subtler and vaster life is in birth...and poetry, the highest essence of speech, must find a fitting voice for them".⁵

"The straining for a new power of rhythm is the first indication of the coming change...rhythm is the subtle soul of poetry and a change in the spirit of the rhythm must come if this change in the spirit of the poetry

1. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 204-05.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

is fully to discover itself and altogether realise its own characteristic greatness and perfection. Mankind is moving to another spirit in its thought and life founded on another and deeper and larger truth of its inner being than it has yet in the mass been able to see. . . . and poetry to express this greater spirit must find out a deeper, larger, more flexible, or, . . . more multitudinously expressive rhythm than the great poets were under the necessity of using. . . . We see accordingly some attempt to break or enlarge, deepen or subtilise the traditional moulds, to substitute others of a more delicate character. . . . to search out new packed or dissolved movements.”¹ And no wonder, if in its “impatient urge. . . . to find a full rhythmic basis for its own way of self-expression. . . . we find too the attempt to initiate a violent and unprecedented revolution in the whole fundamental method of poetic rhythm”.² What is more, there is now the definite tendency not only to create free verse but to set up a theory that “this is the one future chance for poetry”, inasmuch as it is now openly said that “metre and rhyme are. . . . played out things of the past which can no longer be allowed to chain and hamper the great and free movement which the enlarging spirit of poetry demands”.³ Sri Aurobindo, however, considers such a poetry to be “of a very doubtful validity” and thinks, as stated in an earlier chapter, that “in the hands of most of its exponents it seems to be in practice nothing but a license for writing prose in variously cut lengths”.⁴ He is really amazed to see “even a line of free verse consisting of a majestic solitary pronoun”,⁵ and has no doubt that “this is more an eccentric method of printing than a new rhythm.”⁶ But though he does not accept this theory “in its intolerent entirety”, he is yet appreciative of the motive behind it which is no less than to “break away from all the old hampering restrictions and find a new principle of harmony in accordance with the freedom, the breadth and largeness of view, the fineness of feeling and sensation of the modern spirit, some form which shall have the liberty of prose and yet

1. Ibid., pp. 206-07.

2. Ibid., p. 207.

3. Ibid., p. 207.

4. Ibid., p. 207.

5. Ibid., p. 208.

6. Ibid., p. 208.

command the intensified heights and fluctuations and falls of the cadence of poetry.”¹ But he has genuine doubts whether such an experiment can be truly successful, for he observes, “At any rate it has not been fully justified even in the hands of the greatest or most skilful exponents.”² Not even Whitman and Carpenter and certain French writers who are notable advocates as well as competent practitioners of free verse rhythm and have even ably shown how through it “the very substance and soul and characteristic movement of soul-states”³ can be accurately described, can claim that these new experiences which modern artists feel today cannot be conveyed “in the recognised and characteristic”, i.e. the traditional rhythmic mould. His own feeling in the matter is that “the genius of poetic measure walking in the path opened by the ancient discovery of cadenced beat and concentrated rhythm has not yet exhausted itself, nor is there any proof that it cannot accommodate its power to new needs....”⁴ At any rate, he himself did not have to take recourse to such a violently new measure in order to express his new spiritual sensibility or realisation such as we find in *Rose of God*, *Poems Past and Present*, *Last Poems* and above all *Savitri*, in all of which the poetic consciousness or experience is, one may justifiably say, entirely new but neither the poetic rhythm nor the poetic form and style are extravagantly new or licentious as we find in much of modern poetry.

Nevertheless, Sri Aurobindo, after examining the various ways in which *vers libre* has been successfully attempted by Tagore and Whitman, specially the latter, is prepared to concede that inasmuch as “it is a use of the poetic principle of measure in its essence without the limitations of a set form”,⁵ it may be safely assumed that “much can be done in this rhythmical method”.⁶ Only “it is yet doubtful whether in languages which lack the support of quantitative measure, poetical expression in this form can carry home with at all the same force as in the received ways of word-music”.⁷ But

1. Ibid., p. 208.

2. Ibid., pp. 208-09.

3. Ibid., p. 209.

4. Ibid., p. 209.

5. Ibid., p. 216.

6. Ibid., p. 216.

7. Ibid., p. 216.

his greatest objection to it is that "this kind of verse does not give its full spiritual value to the poet's speech".¹ In this connection he refers to both Caprenter and Whitman, who possess, each in his own way, "a power of substance, thought-vision, image . . . energy"² and yet are not recognised as "poets of the first rank" and have not the power to "seize on the soul, take possession and rest in a calm, yet vibrating mastery".³ But "the real poetic cadence has that power, and to make the full use of it is the sign of the greatest masters".⁴ However, for all the strength and subtlety of Sri Aurobindo's arguments against *vers libre* which has come to be accepted as a handmaid of much of modern poetry, we cannot help feeling that he is rather unusually severe with and critical of it and even betrays a rather excessive traditional outlook upon this rhythmic experiment of free, unrestricted expression whose full fruition is yet to be realised by a master-artist.

Besides the freedom claimed in modern times for rhythmic expression, what intensifies the effort of modern poets is that they "pursue much more even than their predecessors the best of their personality" and are hardly "guided by any uniting thought or standard of form".⁵ There is, therefore, very little of that connecting link among them which should make them a unified group of writers like the Victorians or even the Romantics. "Only in the Celtic revival in Ireland have there been a number of considerable writers united by a common artistic motive and ideal."⁶

Nevertheless, in the midst of all this bewildering variety of motives and interests, one can notice, says Sri Aurobindo, "a certain persistent thing which is striving to be".⁷ It is a subtle enough element which has not yet made itself quite manifest to the general view. But this, according to him, is "the most original, the most unworked and fruitful in promise for the future and represents the highest possibility of a greater coming poetry".⁸ As to its distinctive peculiarity he says: "A

1. Ibid., p. 219.

2. Ibid., p. 219.

3. Ibid., p. 219.

4. Ibid., p. 219.

5. Ibid., p. 221.

6. Ibid., p. 221.

7. Ibid., p. 221.

8. Ibid., p. 222.

distinct spiritual turn, the straining towards a deeper, more potent, supra-intellectual and supra-vital vision of things is its innermost secret of creative power.”¹ Indeed, as he sees it with the clarity of the vision of a seer, there is a quite big inner movement at work in the life of humanity today, which is secretly changing man’s very outlook and consciousness. As he says: “Now increasingly the highest turn of the human mind indicates a large opening of its vision to the self as well as the person of man and the spirit of Nature, to supernature, to the cosmic, the universal and the eternal, but without losing any hold on life and earth, which is likely to survive and govern thought and creation and the forms of our living when the present multitude of standpoints, all the conflict and chaos of a manifold seeking and new formation, have resolved themselves into the harmony of a centralising and embracing outlook.”²

The important poets who appear to be the “forerunners of this new spirit and way of seeing” are, according to him, Meredith, Stephen Phillips, Carpenter, A.E., Yeats and Tagore. It is significant that among the pioneers of the modern age Sri Aurobindo gives a place of honour to such neglected poets as Phillips, Carpenter and A.E. In the light of what he has to tell us about them we should do well to reflect whether there is not a real need for a definite change in our attitude towards them as also all those modern poets whom we have, on the whole, neglected as well as those whom we have unduly exalted. Sri Aurobindo presents a new perspective in which we are to try to see the writers of today as well as of the recent past. It is a perspective which we do not usually get in the books on modern poets, numerous and sensitively written as most of them are.

What characterises all these pioneer-poets of the modern age most is, according to Sri Aurobindo, their “inwardness”. As he says: “This aim we may perhaps best express if we take up and modify a phrase of Meredith’s when he speaks of the hampered human voice that could never say :

“Our inmost in the sweetest way”—

hampered by the austerity of its wisdom or the excess of its sense and passion. But if it is rarely that this sweetest way is found—yet do we not get near to it sometimes in

1. Ibid., p. 222.

2. Ibid., p. 222.

Yeats and Tagore ?—at least this new turn of the poetic voice is characteristically an endeavour to see and to say our inmost in the inmost way.”¹

And here again he finds an occasion to impress upon us the true secret of the poetic art. “The natural turn of poetry, that which gives to it its soul of superiority to other ways of human utterance, is the endeavour of the interpretative cast of its mind always to look beyond the object, even to get behind it and evoke from a something that was waiting for us within its own inevitable speech and rhythm. That inwardness is the triumph of great poetical speech, whether the poet has his eye like Homer on physical object and power of action and the externalised thought and emotion which they throw up into the surge of the life-spirit and its forms of character and passion . . . or on the play of the detached or half-detached seeing intellect or the inspired reason —”²

It is this new inward seeing and feeling and thinking which is the greatest impelling power behind their poetry as also that of most of their successors. To quote Sri Aurobindo again : “There is in most recent poetry that counts, . . . some element of this kind of straining, force, pressure on sound and word and vision, and though it often turns into strange, obscure and devious paths, obstructed by the insistence of the superficial desire-soul or weighted by the intellect,—the two powers in us which modern humanity has developed into an exaggerated predominance,—still it reaches out towards this effort to see our inmost in the inmost way, and when it gets free, delivers voices of a supreme power, vision and purity.”³ And no wonder, thinks he, that at the end it may reach the power of “direct seeing by the soul of the soul or self everywhere in its own delivered force of vision”.⁴

This possibility is bound to make its decisive influence felt most on the poetic word and rhythm, for, as he rightly says, “there must always be a change in the basis of the poet’s art when there is a substantial change of the constituting spirit and motive”.⁵ Therefore, when there is this “more subtle spiritual aim” stirring in modern times,

1: *Ibid.*, p. 225.

2: *Ibid.*, pp. 225-26.

3: *Ibid.*, p. 227.

4: *Ibid.*, p. 227.

5: *Ibid.*, p. 228.

the rhythmical movement of poetry acquires a new importance. Broadly speaking, the rhythmical change today will register "a more complete subordination of the metrical insistence to the inner suggestion of the movement".¹ This gives Sri Aurobindo an opportunity to indicate with illustration the subtle rhythmic changes which have occurred in English poetry all these centuries since the time of Shakespeare. Expressed in general terms the basic difference between the old method and the new can be stated thus: "The old poets depended greatly on the metrical fall, made much of the external mould and its possible devices and filled it with the tones of life or thought or the excitement of the things that possessed them and moved them to speech.... The base of the old poetry is a march, a walk or a lift, a measured flow, roll or surge,—or it is with less competent metrists a tripping trot, dance or gallop; but even in the freest movements there is a prevailing metrical insistence. In the new movement the old base is there, but.... insistence of tone has taken full possession of or even conquered the insistence of the fall. A spiritual intonation, not content to fill and at its strongest to overflow the metrical mould, but insistent to take it into itself and carrying it rather than carried in it, is the secret of its melody or its harmony.... It is the tone that builds the verse, gives it its real form and the metrical mould."² He illustrates this form from the poetry of Stephen Phillips. Meredith's poetry is, no doubt, written, according to him, in an earlier technique which faithfully follows the old metrical law but here too "the subtler thing is already coming: some curious turn is given to the beat which persistently compels it to serve some dominant soul-tone of the thought and seeing.... as in '*The Lark Ascending*'".³

This he calls the "spiritual principle of rhythm". A.E., is not a great rhythmist, he is too preoccupied with his vision, more of a truth-seer than a truth-hearer of the Spirit, but when the hearing comes.... the full spiritual intonation rises up and takes possession of the music,—to give one instance only,

Like winds and waters were her ways:
They heed not immemorial cries;

1. Ibid., p. 229.

2. Ibid., pp. 229-32.

3. Ibid., p. 233.

They move to their high destinies
Beyond the little voice that prays.

And in Yeats, a supreme artist in rhythm, this spiritual intonation is the very secret of all his subtlest melodies and harmonies and reveals itself whether in the use of old and common metres which cease to be either old or common in his hands or in delicate new turns of verse.¹

And thus through a selective examination of the new rhythmic peculiarities of these modern poets he shows us that he has no doubt whatsoever in his mind that "here is some beginning of a direct spiritual intonation"² where before the musical tone of the older poetry was "the simply sensuous, the emotional, the thought or the life-tone with the spiritual cadence as the result of some strong intensity of these things".³

In the same way, a subtle change has come over the language of this poetry too. It was in the Elizabethan period, says Sri Aurobindo, that the English poetic speech for the first time "got into it a ring and turn of direct intuitive power, a spontaneous fullness of vision and divine fashion in the utterance".⁴ Even the lesser poets of the period are touched by this intuitive power "but in Shakespeare it runs in a stream and condenses to a richly-loaded and crowding mass of the work and word of the intuition almost unexampled in any poetry".⁵ But the age of Dryden and Pope abandoned this power brought by Shakespeare and the other Elizabethans into English poetry, and getting rid of what appeared to it Elizabethan conceit and extravagance, "sought after a language cut into the precision or full with the suggestions of the poetical intellect",⁶ and went back to ordinary speech, raising it into "a fit instrument of the poetical imagination".⁷ In the process it naturally lost the "Shakespearean directness of intuitive vision and spontaneous power of utterance".⁸ The later poets try to compensate for this loss "by a heightening of the

1. Ibid., pp. 233-34.

2. Ibid., p. 235.

3. Ibid., p. 238.

4. Ibid., p. 238.

5. Ibid., p. 238.

6. Ibid., p. 241.

7. Ibid., p. 241.

8. Ibid., p. 241.

clarified thought and imagination"¹ but cannot get over the "curbing restraints and limits of the imaginative intelligence" which came in the way of "the searching audacities of the intuition".² Thus Shelley's line:

"Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought"
or Keats's

"A thing of beauty is a joy for ever,"

or Wordsworth's lines

"... the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,"

give, according to Sri Aurobindo, "the force and pitch and measure of this often clear, strong, large and luminous, but less intensely surprising and uplifting manner".³ And "this imaginatively intellectual basis of speech remains constant down to the end of the Victorian era".⁴

But in modern times "there emerges... a certain effort to recapture the Shakespearean potency and intensity accompanied by a new and higher element in the workings of the poetic inspiration".⁵ Of course, it does not reach the level of fruition, nor is to be seen everywhere, "but it is there in a comparative abundance and it is the highest strain of its intensities".⁶ When Meredith, for example, writes of "Colour, the soul's bridegroom", we may say that "he has got the intimate revealing image of this fuller and higher intuitive manner".⁷ We find it also in Stephen Phillips's style, such as in the following line

"Motionless in an ecstasy of rain"

or A. E. 's

"Is thrilled by fires of hidden day
And haunted by all mystery"

or Yeats's

"When God goes by with white footfall."

These poets certainly reveal a style and substance which give us again "something that had been lost and yet

1. Ibid., p. 241.

2. Ibid., p. 241.

3. Ibid., p. 242.

4. Ibid., p. 242.

5. Ibid., p. 242.

6. Ibid., p. 245.

7. Ibid., p. 245.

is new and pregnant of new things in English literature....It points to a greater thing than has yet been achieved, and it is itself a higher achievement."¹

But these profound and subtle changes which we find overtaking the language and rhythm of recent poetry are there because of a big change in the inspiring spirit and shaping substance of this new poetry. It may be described, says Sri Aurobindo, "as a great and subtle deepening and enlarging of the thought-mind in the race and a new profounder, closer, more intimate way of seeing, feeling, appreciating, interpreting life and Nature and existence.... The nineteenth century was intellectual, not intuitive, critical rather than creative.... The mind and soul of the race is now moving forward on the basis of what it has gained by a century of intellectual stir and activity, towards a profounder mood and a more internal force of thought and life. The intellectual way of looking at things is being gradually transcended or is raising itself to a power beyond itself; it is moving through the observing mind and reflective reason towards an intimate self-experience, from thought to vision, from intellectual experiment to intuitive experience. Mankind is still engaged in thinking and searching with an immense stress of mental power, but it is now once more in search of its soul and of the spirit and deeper truth of things.... The whole view of and sense of existence has deepened into greater subjectivity"² and this "subjectivity" of modern man is different from that of the nineteenth century, which was "a matter of temperament, an activity of the strongly marked psychological individuality turned upon things".³ This "greater subjectivity" is "a universal subjectivity of the whole spirit, an attempt towards closeness and identity, a greater community of the individual with the universal soul and mind".⁴ This has brought about a significant change in our outlook upon Nature which is now seen "more in her hidden suggestions and soul meanings".⁵ Naturally, "the things that lie behind the material world are almost for the first time being touched and seen with

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 246-247.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 248-51.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

a close and revealing intimacy".¹ What is more, "the communion of the human soul with the Divine is becoming once more a subject of thought and utterance, not now limited to the old religious and personal form, but enlightened by a sense of the Infinite and Eternal which has arisen from and vivified the larger cosmic sense for which the thinking and discovery of the last century was a training".² Not that these things have all actually arrived, "but they are on the way and the first waves of the surge have already broken over the dry beaches of the age of reason".³

Writers like Emerson, Carlyle and Ruskin seem to build, according to Sri Aurobindo, "a bridge of transition from the intellectual transcendentalism of the earlier nineteenth century across - a subsequent low-lying scientific, utilitarian, externalised intellectualism... over to the age now beginning to come in towards us".⁴ And among poets, who were prominent in Sri Aurobindo's time, it is Whitman, Stephen Phillips, A.E., and Yeats who distinctly point to the new consciousness, thought-substance, language and rhythm clearly emerging in the new age for their fuller powers of expression.

Sri Aurobindo does not take us beyond this point in the course and evolution of English poetry. At the time when he was bringing out this series of articles on English poetry in *The Arya*, the Edwardians, the Georgians and the Imagists, to name the famous schools of English poets of the time, had already produced their representative work. But probably Sri Aurobindo had no intimacy with them. Had he revised *The Future Poetry* in order to bring it up-to-date, as he thought of doing "thoroughly before giving it the form of a book",⁵ we might have got significant references not only to these schools of poets but also to the really "modernist" poets like Pound and Eliot, and their successors. But we have to be satisfied with the book as it is. And we need not unduly regret over the obvious omissions we have here. The significant deeper trends and possibilities of English poetry are clearly indicated here and the main lines, as suggested by him, still hold good.

1. Ibid., p. 251.

2. Ibid., pp. 251-52.

3. Ibid., p. 252.

4. Ibid., p. 252.

5. Publisher's note to *The Future Poetry*.

Chapter 12

THE POETRY OF THE FUTURE

1

Sri Aurobindo's chief concern as a seer-philosopher is to discover and point out, as precisely and definitely as possible, the future of man and his life and civilisation on earth. Naturally, therefore, as a literary critic, he would like to penetrate the mystery of his future poetic speech in the light of the conditions, inward and outward, in which he stands today. In a sense, he knows that it is a rather "hazardous occupation" to make such a prediction, for life and mind "are not like physical Nature which runs in precise mechanical grooves".¹ On the contrary, these are "more mobile and freer powers".² All that he would attempt to do, therefore, in the circumstances, is "to distinguish...some possibilities that lie before the poetic mind of the race and to figure what it can achieve if it chooses to follow out certain great openings which the genius of recent and contemporary poets has made free to us".³ But what path it will actually follow "waits still for its own undecided decision".⁴ However, such an attempt of prying into the secrets of the future poetry, even if "hazardous" enough, cannot be altogether avoided by modern man who has begun to take, as Sri Aurobindo says, "an insistent interest in future man".⁵ This has become "the most fruitfully distinguishing characteristic of the modern mind"⁶ and "the attempt to cast a seeing eye as well as a shaping will on the future is now an essential side of the human outlook...on all sides, in thought, in life, in the motives and forms of literary and artistic creation, we are swinging violently away from the past into an unprecedented adventure of new teeming possibilities".⁷ Indeed, never "has the

1. *F. P.*, p. 279.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 152-53.

past counted so little for its own sake,—its tradition is still effectual only when it can be made a power or an inspiration for the future, never has the present looked so persistently and creatively forward”.¹

This is, no doubt, largely true, but his faith in this creatively forward-looking characteristic of the modern mind gets reinforced by his still stronger faith in the fact of evolution itself. As a result of it, he cannot help telling us that “poetry, like everything else in man, evolves”.² There is no doubt that “its fundamental nature, function and law are....always the same.... still there is an evolution within this law of its being. And evolution means a bringing out of new powers which lay concealed in the seed or the first form; the simple gives place to the more complex....the superficial gives place to the more and more profound....”³

In this connection Sri Aurobindo comes out with a theory of poetry which is truly remarkable for both its novelty and profundity. He says: “. . .poetry is a psychological phenomenon, the poetic impulse a highly charged force of expression of the mind and soul of man and therefore in trying to follow out its line of evolution it is the development of the psychological motive and power, it is the kind of feeling, vision, mentality which is seeking in it for its word and idea and form of beauty and it is the power of the soul through which it finds expression or the level of mind from which it speaks which we must distinguish to get a right idea of the progress of poetry. All else is subsidiary, variations of rhythm, language, structure; they are the form, the vehicle; they derive subtly and get their character and meaning from the psychological power and the fundamental motive”.⁴ It is self-evident, therefore, that “if poetry is a highly-charged power of aesthetic expression of the soul of man, it must follow in its course of evolution the development of that soul”.⁵ And then follows a very felicitous and picturesque description of the evolution of the soul of man by Sri Aurobindo. He deals with this favourite subject of his at various places both in prose and poetry but the beauty is that every time the

1. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 265.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 265-66.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

expression or treatment is fresh, striking and delightfully readable. The same thrill of novel charm we get here too; and there is, in addition, the *rasa* of poetic beauty which good critical prose, too, can wear like an easy, natural garment in the heat of its creative intensity at the hands of a master like him. The passage is long but it deserves to be quoted almost in full:

"I put it that.... the soul of man like the soul of Nature can be regarded as an unfolding of the spirit in the material world. Our unfolding has its roots in the soil of the physical life; its growth shoots up and out in many directions in the stalk and branches of the vital being; it puts forth the opulence of the buds of mind and there, nestling in the luxuriant leaves of mind and above it, out from the spirit which was concealed in the whole process must blossom the free and infinite soul of man, the hundred-petalled rose of God. Man, indeed, unlike other forms of being in terrestrial Nature, though rooted in body, proceeds by the mind and all that is characteristic of him belongs to the wonderful play of mind taking up physicality and life and developing and enriching its gains till it can exceed itself and become a spiritual mind, the divine Mind in man. He turns first his view on the outward physical world and on his own life of outward action and concentrates on that or throws into its mould his life-suggestions, his thought, his religious idea, and, if he arrives at some vision of an inner spiritual truth, he puts even that into forms and figures of the physical life and physical Nature.¹ Poetry at a certain stage or of a certain kind expresses this turn of the human mentality in word and in form of beauty. It can reach great heights in this kind of mental mould, can see the physical forms of the gods, lift to a certain greatness by its vision and disclose a divine quality in even the most obvious, material and outward being and action of man; and in this type we have Homer. Arrived to a greater depth of living... man begins to feel more sensitively the passion and power of life, its joy and pain, the wonder and terror and beauty end romance to turn everything into moved thought and sentiment and sensation of the life-soul, the desire-soul in him which first forces itself on his introspection when he begins to go inward. Poetry too takes this turn, rises and deepens to a new kind of greatness and at the summit in this kind we have Shakespeare."²

1. As in the hymns of the Vedic Rishis.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 266-68.

However, the vital way of seeing and creating, in which "thought is involved in life", cannot permanently satisfy the mental being that is man, and he outgrows this stage in order to get "a clear detached idea" of the passion, the emotion, "the thought-suggestions of life" and "see with the calm eye of his reason" and "probe, analyse, get at the law and cause and general and particular rule of himself and Nature".¹ And poetry, too, responds to this mental growth in man and "takes on the lucid, restrained, intellectual and ideal classic form, in which high or strong ideas govern and develop the presentation of life and thought".² And, herein, according to Sri Aurobindo, lies the greatness of the Greek and Latin poets. But this is not the end of the intellectual development of either man and his poetry, for "afterwards the intelligence sets more comprehensively to work, opens itself to all manner of the possibilities of truth...an endless succession of pregnant generalisations. This is the type of modern intellectualism".³ The poetry which will arise out of this phase of intellectual growth of man will be "full of a teeming many-sided poetic ideation", blending "the classical and romantic motives" and combining together "the realistic, aesthetic, impressionist, idealistic ways of seeing and thinking", makes many experiments and combinations, "passes through many phases".⁴ In such a situation neither "the true classic form" nor the "pure and genuine romanticism of the life-spirit" is possible, and all attempts to return to either of these are apt to fail. The truth, according to Sri Aurobindo, is that the poetry of "an age of manysided intellectualism can live only by its many-sidedness and by making everything as it comes a new material for the aesthetic creations of the observing, thinking constructing intelligence".⁵

And so we are to face "the now vital question in this cultural evolution—in what is this intellectualism to culminate?"⁶ If this intellectualism "leads to nothing beyond itself, it must end, however brilliant its work, in a poetic decadence".⁷ This is the crucial question

1. Ibid., p. 268.

2. Ibid., p. 268.

3. Ibid., p. 268.

4. Ibid., p. 269.

5. Ibid., p. 270.

6. Ibid., p. 271.

7. Ibid., p. 271

today – are we in for poetic decadence or a new birth? There are people who say that “since the modern mind is increasingly scientific and less and less poetically and aesthetically imaginative, poetry must necessarily decline and give place to science, for much the same reason, in fact, for which philosophy replaced poetry in Greece”.¹ On the other hand, there are others who suggest that “the poetic mind might become more positive and make use of the materials of science or might undertake a more intellectual though always poetic criticism of life and might fill the place of philosophy and religion”.² But this means more or less the same thing, even “a more protracted decadence”, for it equally means “a deviation from the true law of aesthetic creation”.³ The large fact is that “the pure intellect cannot create poetry. The inspired or imaginative reason does indeed play an important, sometimes a leading part, but even that can only be a support or an influence... it is the spirit within and not the mind without that is the fount of poetry”.⁴ However, Sri Aurobindo does not think that we are heading towards only more and more of intellectualism, more and more of science. On the contrary, “the human intelligence seems on the verge of an attempt to rise through the intellectual into an intuitive mentality; it is no longer content to regard the intellect and the world of positive fact as all or the intellectual reason as a sufficient mediator between life and the spirit, but is beginning to perceive that there is a spiritual mind which can admit us to a greater and more comprehensive vision.... A first opening out to this new way of seeing is the sense of the work of Whitman and Carpenter.... of Tagore and Yeats and A.E., of Meredith and some others of the English poets”.⁵ Sri Aurobindo is aware that there are critics who regard this tendency as only “another sign of decadence; they see in it a morbid brilliance, a phosphorescence of decay”.⁶ He also admits that “there is much that is morbid, perverse or unsound in some recent poetry”.⁷ But then he would like us to

1. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-74.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 273-6.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 2765.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 276.

try to see as well that "this comes from an artificial prolongation of the past or a temporary mixed straining, it does not belong to that element in the new poetry which escapes from it and turns firmly to the things of the future."¹ His own opinion is that decadence sets in "when the poetic mind settles irretrievably into a clumsy and artificial repetition of past forms and conventions or can only escape from them into scholastic or aesthetic prettiness or extravagance. But an age which brings in large and new vital and spiritual truths, truths of our being, truths of the self of man and the inner self of Nature and opens vast untrod ranges to sight and imagination, is not likely to be an age of decadence, and a poetry which voices these things... is not likely to be a poetry of decadence".²

Sri Aurobindo has, therefore, no doubt in his mind that poetry is not heading towards decadence; on the contrary, he feels, it is going to be written with a newly developing "intuitive mentality", resulting in "a greater and more comprehensive vision", "a luminous totality".³ Since the age breaking upon us will, as years pass by, more and more aim at "neither materialism nor an intuitive vitalism nor a remote detached spirituality, but a harmonious and luminous totality of man's being",⁴ we may safely presume, as has been quoted before, that to the poetry of this new age "the whole field of existence will be open for its subject, God and Nature and man and all the worlds, the field of the finite and the infinite. It is not a close, even a high close and ending in this or any field that the future offers to us, but a new and higher evolution, a second and greater birth of all man's powers and his being and action and creation".⁵

It is with this large comprehensive historical sense and vision that Sri Aurobindo, thus, relates the various phases of evolution of poetry with those of the evolution of man himself. Man's poetry is shown to be very closely linked with the level of consciousness attained by him. The future of poetry is, thus, according to this view, interlinked with the future phase of his consciousness and culture. And his sound optimism leads him to

1. *Ibid.*, p. 276.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 279-77.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 277-78.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 278.

feel that the future of both is bright enough. There may be some among us who may not share his optimism and may hold the view that our civilisation and art and literature and thought are all doomed to reach or have already reached a dead end, since mankind cannot go any farther. Indeed, it cannot go any farther if it continues to cling like a leech to its present-day limited, intellect-bound mentality but if its consciousness can undergo a real spiritual change, bringing about a radical transformation of his whole nature and life, his physicality, vitality and mentality, definite signs of which are increasingly emerging both in the East and in the West, modern man need not live under the fear of complete annihilation. The only thing needed is the desire to exceed himself, at first, internally, spiritually and then, with the help and under the guidance of this inner change, to transcend all these limits which hamper the growth of his external life and action.

If, as he has tried to indicate and stress in so many ways and through so many of his writings, we accept his belief that humanity is again moving towards a new intuitive mentality after passing through the cycles of physical, vital and intellectual or rational modes of thinking and living, it is clear that it is to "something very like the effect which was the soul of the Vedic or at least the Vedantic mind that we almost appear to be on the point of turning back in the circle of our course. Now that we have seen minutely what is the material reality of the world in which we live and have some knowledge of the vital reality of the Force from which we spring, we are at last beginning to seek again for the spiritual reality of that which we and all things are".¹ But there will be, he says, quite a substantial difference between our new vision of the spiritual reality and the one which obtained in the old times. In the old days, the spiritual godheads of Truth, Freedom, Unity, Love, Beauty, Delight, Harmony etc. were "Mysteries, which men left to the few, to the initiates and by so leaving them lost sight of them in the end, but the endeavour of this new mind is to reveal, to divulge and to bring near to our comprehension all mysteries....and this turn towards an open realisation may well lead to an age in which man as a race will try to live in a greater Truth than has yet governed our kind.... His creation to

1. *Ibid.*, p. 282.

will then be moved by another spirit and cast on other lines.”¹

If all this takes place even to some definite extent, poetry may recover its old hieratic prestige and power. Of course, quite a good deal of it will continue to be written along the old lines and in accordance with the old commoner aesthetic motives, but what is hopeful and more than probable is that conditions will be there for the emergence of “the poet who is also a Rishi”, “the poet-seer and poet-creator”, “master singers of Truth, hierophants and magicians of a diviner and more universal beauty”.² As a matter of fact, “there is already the commencement” of such a possibility; “the conscious effort of Whitman, the tone of Carpenter, the significance of the poetry of A.E., the rapid immediate fame of Tagore are its first signs”.³ The poet is already becoming the Rishi. As quoted earlier, “Mankind satiated with the levels is turning its face once more towards the heights, and the poetic voices that will lead us thither with song will be among the high seer voices.”⁴

This new poetry of the future will more and more reveal to us that “the spirit and life are not incompatible, but rather a greater power of the spirit brings a greater power of life”.⁵ As a matter of fact, while philosophy often loses itself in abstractions and religion turns to “an intolerant other-worldliness”, the function of poetry has always been to bring about a union between “the immaterial and the concrete, the spirit and life”⁶ and this function will gain in strength and intensity in the years to come.

This poetry will also deepen our experience of beauty and delight by increasingly revealing how these things are really spiritual in origin and purpose. As Sri Aurobindo reminds us, “the ancient Indian idea is absolutely true that delight, Ananda, is the inmost expressive and creative nature of the free self because it is the very essence of the original being of the Spirit”⁷ and “the highest kinds of delight and beauty are those which are one with the highest Truth, the perfection of life and the purest

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-84.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 284.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

and fullest joy of the self-revealing Spirit".¹ Thus, this poetry will seek to provide to us, as already stated in one whole chapter, something like "a supreme harmony of five eternal powers, Truth, Beauty, Delight, Life and the Spirit"² in a manner unattempted and unrealised before. And its mode of apprehension of these things will be predominantly intuitive and not mere vitally and intellectually imaginative. As he says: "It will be first and foremost a poetry of the intuitive reason, the intuitive sense, the intuitive delight-soul in us, getting from this enhanced source of inspiration a more sovereign poetic enthusiasm and ecstacy, and then, it may even be, rise towards a still greater power of revelation nearer to the direct vision and word of the Overmind from which all the creative inspiration comes."³ But this does not mean that it will be something so high and remote and intangible that we of the earth cannot feel at home in it. On the contrary, it will not only seek to make "the highest things near, close and visible"⁴ but "sing greatly and beautifully of all that has been sung, all that we are from outward body to very God and Self, of the finite and the infinite, the transient and the Eternal, . . . with a new reconciling and fusing vision that will make them other to us than they have been even when yet the same".⁵ It will be, thus, in the best possible sense both original and traditional, individual and universal, classical and romantic; realistic and idealistic.

As to how these glimpses of the future intuitive, spiritual poetry are getting clearer and clearer, corroborating in essence the truth of Sri Aurobindo's prophecies, we have already seen to some extent at least, in the selected specimens from some of the well-known modernist English poets, in the fifth chapter.

Let us now see what changes are likely to be effected in the form and language of this poetry. Like several critics of today Sri Aurobindo also believes that "a change in the spirit of poetry must necessarily bring with it a change of its forms . . . at least some subtle and profound alteration".⁶ However, he thinks that "the opening

1. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 286.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 291.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 362.

of the creative mind into an intuitive and revelatory poetry need not of itself compel a revolution and total breaking up of the old forms and a creation of altogether new moulds; it may...be effected for the most part by an opening up of new potentialities in old instruments and a subtle inner change of their character".¹ But remoulding of the old instruments may not prove quite sufficient in course of time, and it is more than probable that in order to satisfy the changed vision there may take place "a considerable departure in all the main provinces of poetic creation, the lyric, the drama, the narrative or epic".²

According to Sri Aurobindo, it is the lyrical impulse which is "the original and spontaneous creator of the poetic form, song the first discovery of the possibility of a higher because a rhythmic intensity of self-expression".³ What is more, the lyrical spirit is capable of adapting itself to various modes of expression. It may find itself quite at home in the "clear spontaneities of song or else it may prefer to weight its steps with thought and turn to a meditative movement or, great-winged, assume an epic elevation, or lyricise the successive moments of an action, or utter the responses of heart to heart, mind to mind, soul to soul, move between suggestions and counter-suggestions of mood and idea and feeling and devise a lyrical seed or concentration of drama".⁴ As such, it is "the widest in range" and "most flexible in form and motive of all the poetic kinds"⁵ and, therefore, it is there that "a new spirit in poetry is likely to become aware of itself and feel out for its right ways of expression... before it works out victoriously its greater motions or ampler figures in narrative and drama".⁶ And "the turn to a more direct self-expression of the spirit must find out its way first by the emergence of a new kind of lyrical sincerity which is neither the directness of the surface life emotions nor the moved truth of the thought mind seizing or observing the emotion and bringing out its thought significances. There are in fact only two pure and absolute sincerities here, the

1. Ibid., p. 362.

2. Ibid., p. 363.

3. Ibid., p. 363.

4. Ibid., p. 364.

5. Ibid., p. 364.

6. Ibid., p. 354.

power of the native intuition of itself by life which has for its result a direct and obvious identity of the thing felt and its expression, and the power of identity of the spirit when it takes up thought and feeling and life and makes them one with some inmost absolute truth of their and our existence.... It is, therefore, a transition from the lyricism of life weighted by the stresses of thought to the lyricism of the inmost spirit which uses but is beyond thought that has to be made".¹

Above all, what Sri Aurobindo would have us remember in this connection is that "the essential and decisive step of the future art of poetry will perhaps be to discover that it is not the form which either fixes or reveals the spirit but the spirit which makes out of itself the form and the word.... Nature creates perfectly because she creates directly out of life and is not intellectually self-conscious, the spirit will create perfectly because it creates directly out of self and is spontaneously supra-intellectually all-conscious".² The fact being so, "the decisive revealing lyrical outburst must come when the poet has learnt to live creatively only in the inmost spiritual sight and identity of his own self with the self of his objects and images and so sing only from the deeper spiritual emotion".³ And in the long run the poet will realise that the poetry which is born from the inmost spirit cannot bind him to any "narrow theory of an intellectual art principle"⁴, for it is the creation at will "according to the truth of the spirit's absolute moments".⁵ The spirit itself will enable him "to discover infinite possibilities of new spiritual measure and intonation in time-old lyrical rhythms or to find a new principle of rhythm and structure".⁶

The dramatic motive and form will also undergo a similar spiritual change. Hitherto we have had "the drama of life, whether presenting only vivid outsides and significant incidents and morals and manners or expressive of the life-soul and its workings in event and character and passion, and the drama of the idea or, more vitally, of the idea-power that is made to work

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 367-68.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 369-70.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 370.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 370.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 370.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 370.

itself out in the life movement.... use the character and the passion for its instruments and at its highest tension appear as an agent of the conflict of ideal forces that produce the more lofty tragedies of human action".¹ But the drama of the future "will differ from the romantic play or tragedy because the thing which dramatic speech will represent will be something more internal than the life soul and its brilliant pageant of passion and character.... the movement that will throughout occupy the mind will be the procession of the soul phases or the turns of the soul action: the character.. will not be mistaken for the person, but accepted as only an inner life notation of the spirit: the passions, which have hitherto been prominently brought forward by the central stuff of the drama, will be reduced to their proper place as indicative colour and waves on the stream of spiritual self-revelation".² Also, "the drama will be no longer an interpretation of Fate or self-acting Karma or of the simple or complex natural entanglements of the human life-movement, but a revelation of the soul as its own fate and determiner of its life and its Karma and behind it of the powers and the movements of the spirit in the universe".³ Nor will it be limited "either by any old or new formal convention, but transmute old moulds and invent others and arrange according to the truth of its vision its acts and the evolution of its dramatic process or the refrain of its lyrical or the march of its epic motive".⁴

Similarly, the epic and other narrative forms of poetry will undergo a deeper change. Hitherto the poetical narrative has "a mental and moral significance at the basis with the story as its occasion or form of its presentation".⁵ It will now be replaced by "a soul significance as the real substance" and "the action will not be there for its external surface interest but as a vital indication of the significance".⁶ In place of the external narrative, there will be what Sri Aurobindo calls "an intensive narrative, intensive in simplicity or in richness of significant shades, tones and colours".⁷ Altogether "the same

1. Ibid., pp. 371-72.

2. Ibid., pp. 373-74.

3. Ibid., p. 374.

4. Ibid., p. 375.

5. Ibid., p. 375.

6. Ibid., p. 375.

7. Ibid., pp. 375-76.

governing vision will be there as in lyric and drama; the method of development will alone be different according to the necessities of the more diffused, circumstanced and outwardly processive form which is proper to narrative".¹

As to the epic, it is sometimes asserted, says Sri Aurobindo, that it is "solely proper to primitive ages when the freshness of life made a story of large and simple action of supreme interest to the youthful mind of humanity, the literary epic an artificial prolongation by an intellectual age and a genuine epic poetry no longer possible now or in the future".² As Sri Aurobindo himself is the author of a massive epic written with a wholly intuitive and revelatory consciousness of this and the other worlds, he cannot subscribe to such a view and is justified in denying its validity. His own view of the matter is that the epic "need not necessarily be a vigorous presentation of external action".³ On the contrary, "the divinely appointed creation of Rome, the struggle of the principles of good and evil as presented in the great Indian poems, the pageant of the centuries or the journey of the seer through the three worlds beyond us are as fit themes as primitive war and adventure for the imagination of the epic creator. The epics of the soul most inwardly seen as they will be by intuitive poetry, are his greatest possible subject, and it is this supreme kind that we shall expect from some profound and mighty voice of the future".⁴ Above all, it will "reveal from the highest pinnacle and with the largest field of vision the destiny of the human spirit and the presence and ways and purpose of the Divinity in man and the universe".⁵

2

It is not only the forms and frames of poetry which will undergo a deep change under the impact of the spiritual consciousness and power but also its word and rhythmic movement. As a matter of fact, Sri Aurobindo would have us remember that "the poetic word is a vehicle

1. *Ibid.*, p. 376.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 376.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 377.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 377.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 377.

of the spirit" itself; it is "the chosen medium of the soul's self-expression"¹ and, therefore, "any profound modification of the inner habit of the soul, its thought-atmosphere, its way of seeing, its type of feeling.... must reflect itself in a corresponding modification,inner greatening and deepening of the word which it has to use".² "The old habits of thought", he continues to say, "cannot contain the new spirit and must either enlarge and deepen themselves and undergo a transformation or else be broken up and make way for another figure."³ It has already been suggested that the governing spirit of the change overtaking human art and literature and thought "is a turn to a more intimate and directly or fully intuitive speech and rhythm".⁴ But "the thing is in itself so subtle that it can better be indicated than analysed, adequately described or made precise to the intelligence".⁵ Moreover, "all poetry except that of the most outward kind.... is in its inmost inspiration and character intuitive, more a creation of the vision and feeling than of the intelligence"⁶ and so "the poet has to do much more than to offer a precise, a harmonious or a forcefully presented idea to the intelligence; he has to give a breath of life to the word and for that must find out and make full use of its potential power of living suggestion.... As in the Vedic theory the Spirit was supposed to create the worlds by the Word, so the poet brings into being in himself and us by his creative word fragmentarily or largely.... an inner world of beings, objects and experiences".⁷ But then "all creation is a mystery in its secret of inmost process and it is only at best the most outward or mechanical part of it which admits analysis; the creative faculty of the poetic mind is no exception. The poet is a magician who hardly knows the secret of his own spell; even the part taken by the consciously critical or constructive mind is less intellectual than intuitive; he creates by an afflatus of spiritual power of which his mind is the channel and instrument and the appreciation of it in himself and others comes not by

1. Ibid., p. 378.

2. Ibid., p. 378.

3. Ibid., p. 378.

4. Ibid., p. 379.

5. Ibid., p. 379.

6. Ibid., p. 379.

7. Ibid., p. 380.

an intellectual judgment but by a spiritual feeling".¹ And it is this intuitive spiritual feeling which will really guide him in the choice of his words, will tell him "whether the word that comes to him is the "adequate" or "effective" or "illuminative" or "inspired" or "inevitable" utterance of his vision.

Thus, these are the different poetic styles in keeping with the different grades of perfection in poetry which Sri Aurobindo has in view: the adequate, the effective, the illuminative, the inspired and the inevitable. One may, no doubt, try to explain, analyse and illustrate these different styles, as he does himself to the best of his capacity, but his warning that "these are things which one has to learn to feel, one can't analyse"² no less holds good. Subject to this qualification, we may cast a glance here at these different styles as explained and illustrated by him in the pages of *The Future Poetry*, so that we are able to see for ourselves which of these poetic styles are likely to prevail most with the poets of the future. But in order to do full justice to the subject, Sri Aurobindo tries first to indicate the deeper psychological truth underlying human speech itself, particularly his poetic utterance. He says that if we look at the words we use in speech in their inmost psychological and not only at their external aspect, we shall see that "what constitutes speech and gives it its life and appeal and significance is a subtle conscious force which informs and is the soul of the body of sound; it is a superconscient Nature-Force raising its material out of our sub-conscience.... It is this Force, this Shakti to which the old Vedic thinkers gave the name of Vak, the goddess of creative speech, and the Tantric psychists supposed that this Power acts in us through different subtle nervous centres on higher and higher levels of its force and that thus the word has a graduation of its expressive powers of truth and vision".³ And the fundamental difference between ordinary speech and poetic speech lies, broadly speaking, in this that the former "proceeds from and appeals to the conceiving intelligence while it is the seeing mind that is the master of poetic utterance"⁴. In this sense, too, therefore, the poet is the seer; he sees through his

1. Ibid., p. 278.

2. L. 3., p. 15.

3. F. P., p. 381.

4. Ibid., p. 382.

word the form and image and movement of his experience.

But this "seeing speech" is of different grades of expression in keeping with the different grades of vision. The first and simplest grade "is limited to a clear poetic adequacy and at its lowest difficult to distinguish from prose statement except by its more compact and vivid form of presentation and the subtle difference made by the rhythm which brings in a living appeal and adds something of an emotional and sensational nearness to what would otherwise be little more than an intellectual expression".¹ The following couplet of Dryden:

Whate'er he did was done with so much ease,
In him alone 't was natural to please :

may be taken to be a good example of it, where the manner of expression is one of terse prose statement "made just poetical by a certain life and vividness and a rhythmic suggestion.... just sufficient to make it a thought felt and not merely presented to the conception".²

But there may be in this adequate style "a higher and much finer quality"³ with "the power to make us not only conceive adequately, but see the object or idea in a certain temperate lucidity of vision".⁴ The following verses of Wordsworth are a good illustration of the "higher" manner of the adequate style :

The waves beside them danced, but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee :
A poet could not but be gay
In such a jocund company.

Here the thing sought to be described is something "seen and lived within us" and awakens "a satisfied soul response". The style has, therefore "the native action of the seeing word and bears the stamp of a spiritual sincerity greater, profounder, more beautiful than that of the intelligence".⁵

The effective poetic style "tries to go beyond this fine and perfect adequacy in its intensities, attempts a more rich or a more powerful expression, not merely sound and adequate to poetic vision, but dynamic and

1. Ibid., p. 382.

2. Ibid., p. 383.

3. Ibid., p. 382.

4. Ibid., p. 383.

5. Ibid., p. 383.

strongly effective",¹ as for example, in the following verses :

Her eyes as stars of twilight fair,
Like twilight's too her dusky hair,
But all things else about her drawn
From Maytime and the cheerful dawn : (Wordsworth)

* * *

When hearts have once mingled
Love first leaves the well-built nest,
The weak one is singled,
To endure what it once possessed. (Shelley)

Sri Aurobindo says that English poetry is specially rich in effective style and "gets from it much of its energy and power".²

The "illuminative" style, however, goes one step still further and contains "a more intimate vision, a more penetrating spiritual emotion, a more intense and revealing speech, to which the soul can be more vibrantly sensible".³ Here it is the inner mind which "sees and feels object, emotion, idea not only clearly or richly or distinctly and powerfully, but in a flash or outbreak of transforming light which kindles the thought or image into . . . a more profoundly revealing vision, emotion, spiritual response".⁴ This may come suddenly and rarely as in Dryden's :

And Paradise was opened in his face

or it may sustain itself for some time as in the following verses of Shelley :

The heart's echoes render
No song when the spirit is mute—
No song but sad dirges,
Like the wind through a ruin'd cell.

In this stanza it appears that the lyrical speech in which it occurs "passes now beyond itself into an illuminative closeness and then we feel, we hear, we ourselves live at the moment through the power of the poetic work the authentic identity of the experience".⁵

1. Ibid., pp. 383-84.

2. Ibid., p. 385.

3. Ibid., p. 386.

4. Ibid., p. 385.

5. Ibid., p. 386.

It may strike across a movement of strong and effective poetical thinking as in Wordsworth's *Ode to Duty*:

Me this uncharter'd freedom tires
or "leap up at once to set the tone of a poem",

She was a phantom of delight
When first she gleam'd upon my sight
A lovely apparition, sent
To be a moment's ornament.

And in the following lines of Shelley and Wordsworth, we get "the pure illuminative speech of poetry not mixed with or arising out of the lucid adequate or the richly or forcefully effective or dynamic manner, but changed into an altogether supra-intellectual light of intuitive substance and vision and utterance"¹:

The silent moon
In her interlunar swoon. —(Shelley)
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude. —(Wordsworth)

But beyond this language of "intuitive illumination" "we arrive at a more uplifted range of an inspired poetic speech which brings to us not only pure light and beauty and inexhaustible depth, but a greater moved ecstasy of highest or largest thought and sight and speech and at its highest culminates in the inevitable, absolute and revealing word".² For example in the following verses:

A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spiring-time from the cuckoo-bird
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides, —(Wordsworth)

we may say that the adequate manner of the poet has undergone "a magical transformation". Sometimes it is "the illuminative speech" which may get "powerfully inspired" and rise "suddenly into the highest revealing word", as in the following verses by Wordsworth:

The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;
I hear the echoes through the mountains throng,
The winds come to me from the fields of sleep.

1. Ibid., pp. 387-88.

2. Ibid., pp. 388-89.

"Here", says Sri Aurobindo, "the inspiration takes up the effort of the poetic intelligence and imagination into a stirred concentration of the speech of sight and in the last movement seems to leap even beyond itself and beyond any pursuit or touch of the intellect into a pure revelatory spiritual vision."¹

Thus, these are the different grades of the power of poetic language but there is no brute fixity or untransformable rigidity in any of them. As Sri Aurobindo says in one of his letters, "all the styles, 'adequate' 'effective', etc. can be raised to inevitability in their own line".² That is to say, each one of these styles has a gradation of its own, and if the poet has the necessary ability and inspiration in him, he may raise it to its own highest point which will be the point of "inevitability" as far as that particular style is concerned. And then there is also something like "supreme inevitability"³ of expression. It is "a speech overwhelmingly sheer, pure and true, a quintessential essence of convincingly perfect utterance".⁴ But it is something which is both unclassifiable and unanalysable. Some of the instances in English poetry would, however, include, says he, such different kinds of style as we have in Keats's "magic casements", Wordsworth's line on Newton in *The Prelude* and his "fields of sleep", Shakespeare's "Macbeth has murdered sleep".

A question was asked him whether there was any co-ordination between the differences of style and the different planes of inspiration, and his answer was that there is no such logical connection, unless, of course, "one can say that the effective style comes from the higher mind, the illumined from the illumined mind, the inspired from the plane of intuition".⁵

However, his opinion is that "the genius of the poet can do work of a high beauty or of a considerable greatness in any of these degrees of poetic speech".⁶ But it is self-evident that "it is the more purely intuitive, inspired or revelatory utterance that is the most rare and difficult for the human mind to command,"⁷ and it is these which

1. Ibid., p. 389.

2. *L* 3., p. 15.

3. Ibid., p. 16.

4. Ibid., p. 16.

5. Ibid., pp. 16-17.

6. *F. P.* pp. 389-90.

7. Ibid., p. 390.

the poetry of the future has to acquire if it is to make a truly solid and distinctive advance upon the achievement of the past. As a matter of fact, the greatest poets have always been "those in whom these moments of a highest intensity of intuitive and inspired speech have been of a frequent occurrence and in one or two, as in Shakespeare, of a miraculous abundance".¹ Only we have got to emphasise that though this kind of utterance has been "essentially the same always", yet it "takes a different colour according to the kind of objective vision and subjective vision which is peculiar to the mind of the poet in its normal action".² This can be seen through an illustration. Here is Shakespeare:

Life's but a walking shadow; . . .
 . . . it is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
 Signifying nothing;

and here is Shelley expressing a similar idea of life's transience:

Heaven's light for ever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
 Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
 Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
 Until Death tramples it to fragments.

Commenting upon them Sri Aurobindo says, "The one has the colour of an intuition of the life-soul in one of its intense moods and we not only think the thought but seem to feel it even in our nerves of mental sensation, the other is the thought-mind itself uttering in a moved, inspired and illuminative language an idea of the pure intelligence."³

We may now take it that it will not be easily possible for the present human mind "to recover the same spirit as moved Shakespeare's speech", for "it is nearer to that of the later poets and their voice of the brooding or the moved poetic intelligence or of the intuitive mind rising out of the intellect and still preserving something of its tones".⁴ "Still the manner of the coming poetry is likely to recover and hold as its central secret something akin to the older poet, a greater straight impact and

1. Ibid., p. 390.

2. Ibid., p. 390.

3. Ibid., p. 391.

4. Ibid., p. 392.

natural body of intuitive intensity.... It will be the language of a higher intuitive mind swallowing up the intellectual tones into the closeness and identities of a supra-intellectual light and Ananda."¹

Thus if the object of the future poetry, as Sri Aurobindo feels it is going to be, is "to express some inmost truth of the things which it makes its subject",² it is certain that it "must express them in the inmost way, and that can only be done if, transcending the more intellectualised or externally vital and sensational expression, it speaks wholly in the language of an intuitive mind and vision and imagination, intuitive sense, intuitive emotion, intuitive vital feeling".³ Much of the present-day English poetry is moving in this direction but with "less subtlety and a more forceful outwardness of sight and tone".⁴ "The old habits of poetic speech still cling around and encrust or dilute the subtler subtlety, the more luminous light.... the deeper depths sought for by the intuitive utterance."⁵ Nevertheless, there are definite signs that "a new manner of speech, a basis for the more inner and illumined poetic language of the future" is being increasingly shaped; and "it is this greating, deepening and making normal of this kind that is likely to bring the perfect voice of the poetry of the future".⁶ Drawing upon the Upanishadic image of the golden lid which ultimately has to be rent by the aspiring human soul in order to obtain the highest, the absolute Truth, he says that that "speech has also to be found that shall come by the rending or removal of the golden lid between our intelligence and the effulgent supra-intelligence and effect a direct and sovereign descent and pouring of some absolute sight and word of the spirit into the moulds of human language".⁷

1. Ibid., p. 392.

2. Ibid., p. 392.

3. Ibid., p. 392.

4. Ibid., p. 392.

5. Ibid., p. 395.

6. Ibid., p. 396.

7. Ibid., p. 397.

Chapter 13

THE ART OF CRITICISM

"....critics have been perhaps too willing to insist", says William Empson, "that the operation of poetry is something magical,.... or like the growth of a flower, which it would be folly to allow analysis to destroy by digging the roots up and crushing out the juices in the light of day. Critics...., on this view, are of two sorts: those who merely relieve themselves against the flower of beauty, and those, less continent, who afterwards scratch it up. I myself, I must confess, aspire to the second of these classes; unexplained beauty arouses an irritation in me, a sense that this would be a good place to scratch; the reasons that make a line of verse likely to give pleasure, I believe, are like the reasons for anything else; one can reason about them; and while it may be true that the roots of beauty ought not to be violated, it seems to me very arrogant of the appreciative critic to think that he could do this, if he chose, by a little scratching".¹

Though apparently something personal, this may be taken as a pointer to the typical modern method of criticism, at least of the section which considers verbal analysis to be the principal instrument of critical understanding and judgment. This reflects an attitude which does not believe in enjoying a thing of beauty or a work of art and literature much as a Hazlitt or a Ruskin or even a Virginia Woolf in our own days, would like to do. On the contrary, it cannot help feeling the itch to "scratch up" "the flower of beauty" if not for anything, at least to mitigate the "irritation" which "unexplained beauty arouses", as it were, inevitably in such minds. Then again, it has also the confidence that it is chiefly by such an act of scratching that it can profitably and competently "reason about" the kind of pleasure which a line of verse is likely to give. This feeling of confidence gets all the more fortified by the belief that "the reasons that make a line of verse likely to give pleasure.... are like the reasons for anything else". The whole art of literary criticism is, thus, reduced to the faculty of

1. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Published in Peregrine Books, 1961, p. 9.

“reasoning about” the pleasure which poetry and literature yield, and, therefore, the person who can reason about it thoroughly, i.e. who does not feel satisfied “by a little scratching” only of the flower of beauty, but believes in scratching it up almost by the roots, is the person who, according to William Empson, is likely to be the best and most satisfactory sort of literary critic. This, at any rate, is the ideal of Empson himself, and one need not wonder if, in this age of scientific investigation, experimental dissection or vivisection and reasoned enquiry at every step into the why and wherefore of things, more and more of practising literary critics today should subscribe to this particular brand of vivisectionist aestheticism or ‘lemon-squeezing’ type of literary criticism, to which he openly professes to belong. The way in which a poem, particularly the words and images used in it, is subjected these days to the minutest possible rational analysis and irreverent dissection both in England and America is sufficient indication of the fact that William Empson is not only giving expression to just a personal fad or whim of his own when he speaks of scratching up the flower of beauty in order to understand it but acting, more or less, as the spearhead of a style and attitude of literary criticism which is now very much in the air. The only difficulty with such a type of criticism is, as Clive Samson says, that it is hardly “sufficiently garden-trained to replant a flower after scratching it up”¹ and the result is that at the end of all this bother and pother we are left with quite a lot of scratchings no doubt but lose the flower altogether.

Sri Aurobindo is no such critic and does not delight in this kind of scratching-up business. Unexplained beauty causes no such irritation in him as vexes William Empson, though it fills him with as genuine a curiosity and as good a desire to understand it as is the case with the latter. And yet he is no less arch a critic, no less sharp-eyed and exacting and thorough-going than William Empson claims to be. Neither the beauty nor the blemish of a thing can easily escape the piercing eye of his observation, and the standards of excellence which he brings to bear on a piece of composition are uncompromising.

Consider, for example, the following comments of Sri Aurobindo upon the poems submitted to him for

1. *The World of Poetry*: op cit., p. 156.

his opinion.

A sonnet¹ by Edward Shanks, considered to be "one of our best younger poets"² is commented upon by Sri Aurobindo thus:

"The sentiment is rather namby-pamby, some of the lines weak, others too emphatic, e.g. the twelfth. It just misses being a really good poem, or is so, like the curate's egg, in parts: e.g., the two opening lines of the third verse are excellent, but they are immediately spoiled by two lines that shout and rattle. So too the last couplet promises well in its first line, but the last disappoints, it is too obvious a turn and there is no fusion of the idea with the emotion that ought to be there and isn't. Still, the writer is evidently a poet and the sonnet very imperfect but by no means negligible."³

A poem⁴ by Stephen Spender, published for the first time in *The New Statesman and the Nation* of November 4, 1933, was sent by one of his disciples to Sri Aurobindo for his opinion and he made the following comment:

"I am afraid it made no impression on me—no poetical impression. I cannot persuade myself that this kind of writing has any chance of survival once the mode is over.

On consideration I should say that whatever merits there are in 'Perhaps' lie in the first four stanzas. The first three seem to me distinguishable from a strong prose only by the compression of language and the stiffness of the movement—too stiff for prose, in quite another way too stiff for the fineness and plasticity there should be in poetic rhythm—specially needed, it seems to me, in free verse. From the fourth line of the fourth stanza I begin to find what seems to me the real poetic touch. The fifth and seventh have the substance and diction of very fine poetry—what I miss is the rhythm that could carry it home to the inner consciousness and leave it with its place permanently there. There seems to be in this technique an unwillingness to get too far away from the characteristic manner of prose rhythm, an unwillingness either to soar or run, as if either would be an unbecoming and too ostentatious action—in three or four lines only the poet is just about to let himself go. Or perhaps there

1. It begins with: 'O Dearest, if the touch of common things.

Can taint our love or wither, let it die.

2. The reference here is to early nineteen-thirties.

3. *L. E. T.*, p. 95.

4. Its title is *Perhaps*.

is the same tendency as in some modern painting and architecture, a demand for geometric severity and precision. But the result is the same. It may be that this kind of writing cuts into the intellect—it touches only the surface of the vital, the life-spirit which after all has its rights in poetry, and does not get through into the soul. That at least is the final impression it leaves on me.”¹

These two specimens of Sri Aurobindo’s critical evaluation of actual poems are, I believe, sufficient to show that he is no less analytical—though it may not be quite in the Empsonian sense or manner—, sharp-eyed, minute and exacting in the scrutiny of “the flower of beauty” than William Empson himself. Also, it should not be understood that he is so exacting only in the case of those poets who do not belong to his “circle” or the spiritual domain which may be said to be his own favourite haunt or territory. He is equally sharp and severe with his own poet-disciples. From the mass of letters, painstakingly concerned with his helpful comments and opinions on the poems sent by some of his disciples for correction as well as evaluation, only a fragment of which has been hitherto published, it is clear that his critical judgment is ever alert, ever wide-awake and sharp, ever shrewd and discriminating, whether the poem under review is mystic, spiritual or non-spiritual, whether it is written by one of his men or an outsider. Here are, for example, two typical samples of the way he valued the poems of two of his most beloved and brilliant poet-disciples.

The poem is entitled *Moon’s Fulfilment*. The author is a fine English poet, J.A. Chadwick,² renamed Arjava by Sri Aurobindo. Here is the latter’s comment upon it.

“The one stumbling block for you now is your difficulty in combining clear directness and lucidity with your turn for a richly packed and imaged thought. There is a tendency sometimes to put too many images together, shooting them into each other in a way which is not always easy to carry off—even the greatest masters of poetic style have sometimes stumbled in this kind of effort. And generally there is a tendency to pack the thought and clip the expression to the utmost and sometimes this goes to an excess of compression which makes it a little difficult

1. *Mother India*, December 1955, pp. 53-54.

2. A collection of his poems was published by John M. Watkins, London in 1939.

to seize at once the significance. When you do combine the lucidity with the pressed thought, the result is often very fine."¹

The next one is by K. D. Sethna,² renamed Amal Kiran by Sri Aurobindo. It is called *The Sovereign Secret*. On its first draft Sri Aurobindo made the following comment:

"First verse admirable—also the fourth line of the second verse. But the second verse is far from perfect. Poetry that arrives at its aim gives the reader a sense of satisfying finality in the expression (even when the substance is insignificant); it is like an arrow that hits the target in the centre. Poetry that passes by the target or hits only the outside of it, either fails or gets a partial success, but in any case it does not carry that sense of satisfying finality. This is the difference between the two verses."³

It is, thus, evident that in the matter of evaluation of actual poems Sri Aurobindo is no less unsparing and shrewdly critical than William Empson and his school. Indeed, it is an ever-conscious and minutely discerning critical faculty which he brings to bear upon the poem under review, whether it is literary or non-literary, spiritual or non-spiritual. But there is a gulf of difference in the sensibility, outlook, aims and objects governing the critical mind of Sri Aurobindo and that of the school of critics to which William Empson belongs. As far as Sri Aurobindo is concerned, his creative sensibility and critical activity are essentially of a piece. He does not look upon them as two entirely distinct functions of the mind. Just as it is out of a silent mind and as a result of the inspiration from above that he invariably writes his poetry, drama or prose, so it is out of the power of such a concentrated silence within that he judges his own or others' works. Naturally, it is not by any set rules and standards or any deliberate reasoning process of the mind that he appreciates or judges any work. On the contrary, he holds that it is only by some subtle intuitive power alone that the critic of art or literature can best understand and evaluate it by entering into its very spirit. As a matter of fact, his view is that with every creative artist there is "an inner power of descri-

1. Written on May 2, 1931, but not yet published.

2. A good collection of his poems was published under the title *The Adventure of the Apocalypse* by Sri Aurobindo Circle, Bombay, in 1949.

3. Not yet published.

mination" which is constantly at work intuitively guiding him to choose the right materials and means of expression and to reject "all that is foreign, superfluous, otiose, all that is a mere diversion, distractive and deformative, excessive or defective."¹ If such a "discriminating inner sense" can guide the creative artist himself in his act of creation, it is obvious that one who sets himself as a judge or critic of works of art and literature should be no less governed and guided by this very intuitive faculty. In any case, the kind of discriminating or judging faculty which a critic has got to have for evaluating literary or artistic works is, according to Sri Aurobindo, "not that of the critical intellect"² nor are the standards by which he would determine their merits or faults, to be "fixed by any set law of the critical reason".³ It is not by any intellectual analysis but by a kind of vision, intuitive and subtle rather than critical and logical, that he can "seize the secret inner law of beauty and harmony" without which no artistic work worth the name can come into being. A critic, therefore, who attempts to understand and evaluate a work of art by rule and intellectual process "uses a false or at any rate an inferior method and cannot do his best".⁴ He should, instead, call to his aid what Sri Aurobindo calls "the intuitive critical vision".⁵ At any rate, the kind of critical faculty with the aid of which the creative artist himself works during his act of creation "constantly selecting and rejecting in accordance with a principle of truth and beauty which remains always faithful to a harmony, a proportion, an intimate relation of the forms to the idea",⁶ has got to be of the nature of this intuitive critical vision. And as far as the appreciation of beauty by a critical artist is concerned, the intellect or critical reason may, according to Sri Aurobindo, play a constructive role, if it is willing to be directed and disciplined by the discriminating inner sense, and not claim to act as "the supreme judge or law-giver".⁷ His reason for this is simple and clear. "The business of the intellect is to analyse the elements, parts, external processes,

1. *The Human Cycle*, Ashram Edition, p. 173.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 173

3. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

apparent principles of that which it studies and explain their relations and workings.... (and) as with truth of religion, so with the highest and deepest truth of beauty, the intellectual reason cannot seize its inner sense and reality, not even the inner truth of the apparent principles and processes, unless it is aided by a higher insight not its own."¹ The rational critic who, thus, depends exclusively upon his intellectual power of observation, analysis and judgment for evaluating a literary work is evidently handicapped by the inherent limitations of the tool itself with which he works. If his judgment is narrow, partial, superficial, or even at times, distorted and misdirected, it is not really so much his own fault as that of the instrument of his judgment and this fault in his criticism will persist until he calls to his aid a power of insight which is higher and subtler than the intellect. As the intellectual reason cannot give the creative artist the true idea of the "method, process or rule by which beauty can or ought to be created, so also it cannot give to the appreciation of beauty the deeper insight which it needs."² The utmost it can do is to help to "remove the dullness and vagueness of the habitual perceptions and conceptions of the lower mind which prevent it from seeing beauty or which give it false and crude aesthetic habits.... by giving to the mind an external idea and rule of the elements of the things it has to perceive and appreciate"³. What the critic or appreciator of beauty (or a thing of artistic or literary beauty) needs, besides the faculty of intellectual reason, is, according to Sri Aurobindo, "the awakening of a certain vision. an insight and an intuitive response in the soul".³ Just as the creative artist has to go deep within himself and establish contact with his true psychic being in order to create his object of beauty from the soul-consciousness and not merely his physical, sensuous, intellectual, or even imaginative consciousness, as we usually understand it, so the true appreciator of beauty has to go by the judgment of his soul and not his mind or senses only. Let us remind ourselves again of Sri Aurobindo's memorable statement: "the true creator, the true hearer is the soul," and on this analogy, naturally, the true

1. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

* *Ibid.*, p. 174.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

critic of poetry or art can only be the soul. It is self-evident too, for the job of a true critic of beauty is not to understand it only in its external form and aspects and relation of the various parts and processes which went into its making, but to establish a more living and more intimate contact with it, to get to the very soul-life of it. If he depends upon reason only, he may study it from outside but cannot get the living inner contact which is the most essential thing, unless his reasoning faculty learns "to aid itself by a more direct insight springing from the soul itself and to call at every step on the intuitive mind to fill up the gap of its own deficiencies".¹

It is quite evident, then, how the scratching-up of the reasoning power which seems to be the sole preoccupation of the true critic of beauty, according to Empson, is inadequate for Sri Aurobindo's purposes. It may be even positively harmful if it is carried to the extreme without calling in the aid of "the intuitive critical vision". In any case, there is a whole world of divergence between Sri Aurobindo and William Empson as far as the purpose and method of criticism are concerned.

Sri Aurobindo goes so far as to think that this marshalling of "the intuitive critical vision" is a sign of the higher development of the critical consciousness of man. As he rises higher and higher in the evolutionary growth of his consciousness he is bound to exceed the limits of his reasoning faculty upon which he depends so much at present for understanding everything including the fine arts and the finer actions and products of his inner being. Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of the history of the development of literary and artistic criticism inevitably points to this conclusion. "In its earliest stages," he says, "the appreciation of beauty is instinctive, natural, inborn, a response of the aesthetic sensitiveness of the soul, which does not attempt to give any account of itself to the thinking intelligence. When the rational intelligence applies itself to this task, it is not satisfied with recording faithfully the nature of the response and the thing it has felt, but it attempts to analyse, to lay down what is necessary in order to create a just aesthetic gratification, it prepares a grammar or technique, an artistic law and canon of construction, a sort of mechanical rule of process for the creation of beauty, a fixed code or *Sastra*. This brings in the long reign of academic criticism

1. Ibid., p. 174,

superficial, technical, artificial, governed by the false idea that technique, of which alone critical reason can give entirely adequate account, is the most important part of creation and that to every art there can correspond an exhaustive science which will tell us how the thing is done and give us the whole secret and process of its doing. A time comes when the creator of beauty revolts and declares the charter of his own freedom, generally in the shape of a new law or principle of creation, and this freedom once vindicated begins to widen itself and to carry with it the critical reason out of all its familiar bounds. A more developed appreciation emerges which begins to seek for new principles of criticism, to search for the soul of work itself and explain the form in relation to the soul or to study the creator himself or the spirit, nature, and ideas of the age he lived in and so to arrive at a right understanding of his work. The intellect has begun to see that its highest business is not to lay down laws for the creator of beauty, but to help us to understand himself and his work, not only its form and elements but the mind from which it sprang and the impressions its effects create in the mind that receives. Here criticism is on its right road . . .”*

This, then, according to Sri Aurobindo, is or should be the “right road” of criticism. It begins to serve its proper function only when it tries to “search for the soul of the work itself and explain the form in relation to the soul or to study the creator himself or the spirit, nature and ideas of the age he lived in and so to arrive at a right understanding of his work”. We are reminded here of what Hazlitt regards proper criticism to be, and how he, too, differentiates this proper criticism from the kind of formal criticism of technique or artificial application of set principles or fixed codes which have been observed or broken in the particular work of art under examination. It was with particular reference to Dryden’s Prefaces that Hazlitt said, “A genuine criticism should, as I take it, reflect the colours, the light and shade, the soul and body of a work . . .;”¹ on the contrary, the kind of criticism which Dryden practised, or for the matter of that, the critics as a whole of the so-called classical period in English literary history practised was one which concerned itself with the formal,

* *The Human Cycle*, Ashram Ed. pp. 175-76.

1. *Table Talk*, 1821-22, quoted in Cowl’s book, p. 274,

superficial plan and construction of a work of art and considered a poem as if it were "a piece of formal architecture".¹ In this kind of formal criticism, says Hazlitt, "we are told something of the plot or fable, of the moral, and of the observance or violation of the three unities of time, place and action.... but we no more know.... what the essence of the work is, what passion has been touched, or how skilfully, what tone and movement the author's mind imparts to his subject or receives from it, than if we had been reading a homily or a gazette".² And the net result he continues to say wittily, is that "we know everything about the work, and nothing of it".³

Yet we must not think that because Hazlitt uses here the expression "the soul and body of a work", his views and Sri Aurobindo's are completely identical. So far as the aim of criticism being the discovery of the essence or soul of the work of art is concerned, there is evidently much similarity between the two, but Hazlitt does not make it quite clear how this essence or soul of a work is to be discovered and arrived at. Negatively, he is aware that it cannot be reached by a formal analysis of the "plan and elevation" or shape and architecture of a poem or by the application of some set rules or laws already agreed to. But what is or should be the positive approach of a critic is not made quite clear. One may infer, however, that according to him it can be had not through the operation of the reasoning faculty but some subtle power of sensuous or psychological imagination which succeeds in breaking open the outer formal crust of the work under examination and getting near the thought and passion, the inner vital life and movement and general psychological truths about human nature controlling and organising it from inside. Hazlitt's power of sensuous, vital or psychological imagination is not, therefore, as deep a thing as "the intuitive critical vision" of Sri Aurobindo, and is, after all, just a more penetrating and subtler working of the intellect or intellectual imagination itself. Sri Aurobindo is not for some kind of the mere romantic subjective exaltation of the intellectual faculty of the critic, as Hazlitt, the Romantic critic here obviously seems to be,

1. *Ibid.*, p. 274.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 274.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 274.

There is, then, Carlyle who like Hazlitt is an advocate of interpretative criticism and would like the critic to go beyond the finding of the formal plan and structure of a poem. But he moves one step further than Hazlitt and evidently comes closer to Sri Aurobindo's standpoint, when he says, referring to the criticism obtaining in the 18th and early 19th centuries: "The grand question is not now a question concerning the qualities of diction, the coherence of metaphors, the fitness of sentiments, the general logical truth, in a work of art, as it was some half-century ago among most critics; neither is it a question mainly of a psychological sort, to be answered by discovering and delineating the peculiar nature of the poet from his poetry, as is usual with the best of our own critics at present; but it is, not indeed exclusively but inclusively of those two other questions, properly and ultimately a question of the essence and peculiar life of the poetry itself. The first of these questions, as we see it answered, for instance, in the criticism of Johnson and Kames, relates, strictly speaking, to the *garment* of poetry; the second, indeed, to its *body* and material existence, a much higher point; but only the last to its *soul* and spiritual existence, by which alone can the body, in its movements and phases, be informed with significance and rational life.... Not only who was the poet, and how did he compose; but what and how was the poem, and why was it a poem and not rhymed eloquence, creation and not figured passion? These are the questions for the critic. Criticism stands like an interpreter between the inspired and the uninspired; between the prophet and those who hear the melody of his words, and catch some glimpse of their material meaning, but understand not their deeper import. She pretends to open for us this deeper import; to clear our sense that it may discern the pure brightness of this eternal Beauty, and recognise it as heavenly, under all forms where it looks forth, and reject, as of the earth earthy all forms, be their material splendour what it may, where no gleaming of that other shines through."¹

This is, no doubt, a distinct advance on Hazlitt's ideal objective of criticism, though when the latter stated that "a genuine criticism should.... reflect the colours, the light and shade, the soul and body of a work...." he was not, in theory, far from the former in the advocacy

1. *State of German Literature*, 1827. quoted in Cowl's book on pp. 275-76.

of the search for the "soul and spiritual existence" underlying a work of art. But in so far as Carlyle relates the "spiritual existence" of a particular work of art to some "eternal Beauty" which is essentially of a heavenly character and imparts by its presence a peculiar splendour or "pure brightness" to that work, it is evident that Carlyle's conception of the soul is deeper and subtler than Hazlitt's subjective one. His is an interpretation which comes close enough to Sri Aurobindo's conception of the soul of a work of art. And yet it is obvious that when Carlyle sets down to indicate how this deeper task of criticism which he associates with the contemporary German critical mind is accomplished in actual practice, he betrays the deficiency to which Sri Aurobindo draws our attention with so much point. It is with an appreciative sense of approval that Carlyle says that the German critics accomplish this task by "rigorous scientific enquiry by appeal to principles which, whether correct or not, have been deduced patiently, and by long investigation, from the highest and calmest regions of Philosophy".¹ And what is more, he is as good as delighted to see that "this finer portion of their criticism is . . . also embodied in systems"* with this difference only that whereas "the systems of Boileau and Blair" are much shallower, those of the German critics are not, and yet these are no less "coherent, distinct and methodical" than theirs. Thus, for an objective, scientific, mechanical system of the classical period, Carlyle substitutes a philosophical or psychological system.

As far as the ultimate objective of criticism is concerned, Carlyle's standpoint is true enough but the method by which it is to be realised in actual practice is the same rational, intellectual, rigorous method as is bound to get codified, in course of time, into some kind of an external, more or less mechanical, system, however "coherent, distinct and methodical" apparently, and, therefore, can only act as a clog upon the creative as well as critical artist. Unless one calls to one's aid some higher intuitive faculty to know the truth of a matter, one is likely to discover that even "the highest and calmest regions of Philosophy" do not take one beyond the boundaries of intellect. But the intellectual, rational understanding has, according to Sri Aurobindo, got to

1. Ibid., p. 276.

* Ibid., p. 276.

be overpassed in one's march on the right road of criticism in order to reach the ultimate consummation through the aid of "a higher faculty.... suprarational in its origin and nature".¹ He clearly points out that "the conscious appreciation of beauty" which seems to be the avowed objective of both Hazlitt and Carlyle, and, indeed, of the entire class of critics, whether Romantic or Classical, objective or subjective, scientific, philosophical or psychological, "reaches its height of enlightenment and enjoyment not by analysis of the beauty enjoyed or even by a right and intelligent understanding of it, — these things are only a preliminary clarifying of our first unenlightened sense of the beautiful,—but by an exaltation of the soul in which it opens itself entirely to the light and power and joy of the creation".² It is because our ultimate objective in criticism no less than in actual artistic or literary creation is to attain to a pure condition of identity with the object concerned. It is to attain the truest and deepest or innermost possible essence or, as the Sanskrit aestheticians put it, *Rasa* (i.e. the very soul) of the object under contemplation, and not merely "a right and intelligent understanding of it" or just an enlightened sense of the beautiful underlying it. Therefore, it is evident that our most conscious appreciation of beauty can reach the ultimate height of enlightenment and enjoyment only when "the soul of beauty in us identifies itself with the soul of beauty in the thing created and feels in appreciation the same divine intoxication and uplifting which the artist felt in creation".³ For him, quite naturally, "criticism reaches its highest point when it becomes the record, account, right description of this response; it must become itself inspired, intuitive, revealing".⁴ In other words, as he says further, "the action of the intuitive mind must complete the action of the rational intelligence and it may even wholly replace it and do more powerfully the peculiar and proper work of the intellect itself; it may explain more intimately to us the secret of the form, the strands of the process, the inner cause, essence, mechanism of the defect and limitations of the work as well as of its qualities. For the intuitive intelligence, when it has been sufficiently trained and developed, can take up always the work of the intellect

1. *The Human Cycle*, op. cit. p. 176.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

and do it with a power and light and insight greater and surer than the power and light of the intellectual judgment in its widest scope. There is an intuitive discrimination which is more keen and precise in its sight than the reasoning intelligence".¹

The critical activity is, thus, brought by Sri Aurobindo to the same level as the creative one and is itself turned into a richly creative thing. But this can happen only when criticism reaches its highest point, when it itself becomes "inspired, intuitive, revealing". Obviously, this is something which is not easy to attain, and "it is only the few that can be trusted to discern the true value of things in poetry and art".² But such a discernment, once made, in the light of "a vital and illuminative criticism from within.... can sometimes almost take the place of a direct knowledge"³ which we can wholly depend upon.

However, until this ideal state is reached in criticism, we cannot altogether prevent the growth of diversity of critical opinions and tastes, chiefly because, constituted as we are at present, "all criticism of poetry is bound to have a strong subjective element that is the source of the violent differences in the appreciation of any given author"⁴ even by eminent writers and critics.

How sharp and violent can be the difference of opinion even of eminent critics can be seen from the following statement which was once made to Sri Aurobindo by one of his disciples: "Saintsbury as good as declares that poetry is Shelley and Shelley poetry—Spenser alone, to his mind, can contest the right to that equation.... Aldous Huxley abominates Spenser; the fellow has got nothing to say and says it with consummately cloying melodiousness; Swinburne, as is well-known, could never think of Victor Hugo without bursting into half a dozen alliterative superlatives, while Matthew Arnold it was, I believe, who pitied Hugo for imagining that poetry consisted in using 'divinite', 'eternite', 'infinite' as lavishly as possible. And then there is Keats, whose *Hyperion* compelled even sneering Byron to forget his usual condescending attitude towards 'Johnny' and confess that nothing grander had been seen since Aeschylus; Racine, too, cannot be

1. Ibid., p. 176.

2. L 3., p. 263.

3. F. P. p. 5.

4. L. 3., pp. 253-54.

left out—can he? Voltaire adored him, Voltaire who called Shakespeare a drunken barbarian....”¹

Also we all know that Dr. Johnson found *Lycidas* crude and unmelodious, Jeffreys remarked about Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* as well as Keats’s *Endymion*, “This will never do.” Arnold called Shelley an “ineffectual angel beating in the void his luminous wings in vain”.

These are, no doubt, extreme cases. Nevertheless, we cannot get away from the central fact that it is the presence of this personal temperamental element which has really given rise to what is known as subjective criticism. There are critics who frankly declare that everything here, including Art and Beauty, is relative and all appreciation of things is entirely dependent upon the mind or consciousness which views and appreciates, and they go in, therefore, in all honesty for a purely subjective criticism—“this is why I like this and disapprove of that, I give my own values”. “Most, however,” says Sri Aurobindo, “want to fit their personal likes and dislikes to some standard of criticism which they conceive to be objective.”² And it is this need of objectivity, of the support of some impersonal truth independent of our personality “which is the main source of theories, canons, standards of art”.³ But then these theories, canons, standards being themselves the product, in a greater or less measure, of the personality of the formulators, vary and conflict with one another and “are set up in one age only to be broken in another”.⁴ Such an intriguing situation naturally gives rise to a basic question: “Is there then no beauty of art independent of our varying mentalities? Is beauty a creation of our minds, a construction of our ideas and our senses, but not existent otherwise?”⁵ But if Beauty is thus taken to be non-existent in Nature and a creation of our own minds only, this is something which is palpably absurd and quite contrary to the facts of life. We cannot get away from the fact that “it is in response to an object and not independently of it that the idea of the beautiful or not beautiful originally rises within us”.⁶

1. Ibid., p. Footnote, pp. 303-04.

2. Ibid., p. 264.

3. Ibid., p. 264.

4. Ibid., p. 264.

5. Ibid., p. 264.

6. Ibid., p. 264.

Upon this general confusion of thought Sri Aurobindo seeks to shed the necessary light of guidance by suggesting, "Beauty does exist in what we see, but there are two aspects of it, essential beauty and the form it takes. 'Eternal beauty wandering in her way' does that wandering by a multitudinous variation of forms appealing to a multitudinous variation of consciousness. There comes in the difficulty. Each individual consciousness tries to seize the eternal beauty expressed in a form (here a particular poem or a work of art), but is either assisted by the form or repelled by it, wholly attracted or wholly repelled, or partially attracted or partially repelled. There may be errors in the poet's or artist's transcription of beauty which mar the reception, but even these have different effects on different people. But the more radical divergences arise from the variation in the constitution of the mind and its difference of response."¹ Thus differences of response are bound to exist and "a critic cannot escape altogether from these limitations".² He can, however, "try to make himself catholic and objective and find the merit or special character of all he reads or sees in poetry and art, even when they do not evoke his strongest sympathy or deepest response".³ At any rate, Sri Aurobindo himself tries to be as catholic as possible in his approach. As he says, for example, "I have little temperamental sympathy for much of the work of Pope and Dryden, but I can see their extraordinary perfection or force in their own field, the masterly conciseness, energy, point, metallic precision into which they cut their thought or their verse, and I can see too how that can with a little infusion of another quality be the basis of a really great poetic style, as Dryden himself has shown in his best work."⁴ Indeed, if one looks at the situation a little clearly and detachedly, one can easily see that all these divergences "rise from a conception of beauty and a feeling for beauty which belongs to the temperament".⁵ Yet if it is done with sincerity and proper integrity of purpose, "the critic can help to open the mind to the kinds of beauty he himself sees and not only to discover but to appreciate at their full value

1. Ibid., pp. 264-65.

2. Ibid., p. 265.

3. Ibid., p. 265.

4. Ibid., p. 265-66.

5. Ibid., p. 266.

certain elements that make them beautiful or give them what is more characteristic or unique in their peculiar beauty".¹ Thus, "Housman, for instance, may help many minds to see in Blake something which they did not see before. They may not agree with him in his comparison of Blake and Shakespeare, but they can follow him to a certain extent and seize better that element in poetic beauty which he overstresses but makes at the same time more vividly visible."²

Thus Sri Aurobindo prescribes the cultivation of a kind of balance between one's temperamental leaning or preference and a general catholicity, objectivity and detachment of outlook and understanding, a balance, that is to say, between the best of romanticism and the best of classicism. But this is also something which is not easy to attain and can happen when the critic concerned has acquired a fairly mature mind and immensely tolerant spirit. This becomes particularly difficult to attain when one is dealing with contemporary writers. That is why we are obliged to say with Sri Aurobindo that "contemporary poetry seldom gets its right judgment from contemporary critics".³ It is common experience that the contemporary critic "likes only the poetry that appeals to his own temperament or taste, the rest he condemns or ignores".⁴ Of course, there are other factors, too, besides the temperamental, which prevent contemporary criticism from giving us full satisfaction or from reaching the height of excellence required. The dangers which, according to Sri Aurobindo, beset this criticism are four-fold: (i) "there is the charm of new thought and feeling and expression of tendency which blinds us to the defect and misplaces or misproportions to our view the real merits of the expression itself"; (ii) "there are powerful cross-currents or immediate attraction and repulsion which carry us from the true track"; (iii) "...there is the inevitable want of perspective which prevents us from getting a right vision of things too near us in time"; and (iv) "if, in addition, one is oneself part of a creative movement with powerful tendencies and a pronounced ideal, it becomes difficult to get away from the standpoint it

1. Ibid., p. 266.

2. Ibid., p. 267.

3. Ibid., p. 268.

4. Ibid., p. 268.

creates to a larger critical outlook".¹ It is not surprising therefore, if it is found extremely difficult to be an infallible critic of contemporary art and literature. However, quite an appreciable advance in this direction may be made if one is "inspired by a warm glow of sympathy and understanding tempered by discernment, restraint and measure"² or if one makes, like Sri Aurobindo, the "practice of appreciating everything that can be appreciated as a catholic critic would".³

Until a critic has reached this level of catholicity or of "sympathy and understanding tempered by discernment, restraint and measure", we have to accept the fact that contemporary judgments are not likely to be reliable. Even the judgment of poets themselves is unsafe. As Sri Aurobindo says in one of his letters, "If you send your poems to five different poets, you are likely to get five absolutely disparate and discordant estimates of them".⁴ Indeed, it has often so happened that "...very poor poets have enjoyed a great contemporary fame and very great poets have been neglected in their time".⁵ His sensible advice to a writer, in such a situation, is, therefore, that he should "go on his way, trying to gather hints from what people say for and against when their criticisms are things he can profit by, but not otherwise moved (if he can manage it)...seeking mainly to sharpen his own sense of self-criticism by the help of others".⁶

But if contemporary judgment is unreliable, there are at least "two judges whose joint verdict cannot easily be disputed, the World and Time".⁷ Of course, "the World's verdict is secure only when it is confirmed by Time. For it is not the opinion of the general mass of men that finally decides, the decision is really imposed by the judgment of a minority and elite which is finally accepted and settles down as the verdict of posterity; in Tagore's phrase it is the universal man, *Viswa Manava*, or rather something universal using the general mind of man, we might say the Cosmic Self in the race, that fixes

1. *F. P.*, p. 6.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

3. *L3.*, p. 268.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 268-69.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

the value of its own works.”¹ At any rate, “in regard to the great names in literature this final verdict seems to have in it something of the absolute so far as anything can be that in a temporal world of relativities. . . . Lesser reputations may fluctuate, but finally whatever has real value in its own kind settles itself and finds its just place in the durable judgment of the world. Work which was neglected and left aside like Blake’s or at first admired with reservation and eclipsed like Donne’s is singled out by a sudden glance of Time and its greatness recognised or what seemed buried slowly emerges or re-emerges; all finally settles into its place”.²

It is this interesting and relatively reliable factor beyond the reach of man’s control which gives rise to what Sri Aurobindo felicitously calls “an abiding intuition of poetic and artistic greatness”.³ It is chiefly by force of such “an abiding intuition” that “the greatness of Shakespeare, of Dante, of others of the same rank is unquestioned and unquestionable and the recognition of it has always been there in their own time and afterwards.”⁴ Also, “Virgil and Horace stood out in their own day in the first rank among the poets and that verdict has never been reversed since.”⁵ There is no doubt that “at first there may be adverse critics and assailants, but these negative voices die away”.⁶ One may speak, of course, of “the discrediting of some and the rehabilitation of the discredited” . . . and put forward the examples of Dryden and Pope and say: “Keats and his contemporaries broke their canons and trampled over their corpses to reach romantic freedom; now there is a rehabilitation.”⁷ “But all this”, says Sri Aurobindo, in his letter dated 6. 10. 1934, “is something of an illusion – for mark that even at the worst Pope and Dryden retained a place among the great names of English literature. No controversy, no depreciation could take that away from them”.⁸ Thus it may be safely assumed that through the subtle working of the two infallible and ultimate

1. Ibid., p. 273.

2. Ibid., p. 274.

3. Ibid., p. 270.

4. Ibid., p. 269.

5. Ibid., p. 269.

6. Ibid., p. 270.

7. Ibid., p. 270.

8. Ibid., p. 270.

judges, namely, the World and Time, "whose joint verdict cannot easily be discredited", mankind as a whole comes to develop "an intuition of greatness by which the great poet or artist is distinguished from those who are less great and these again from the not-great-at-all".¹ Only it is rather asking too much if one expects "this intuition to work with a mechanical instantaneousness and universality so that all shall have the same opinion and give the same values".²

However, in order that our criticism is true literary criticism and not something else, Sri Aurobindo, like most modern progressive literary critics, discredits the biographical and historical methods of criticism which gained such an ascendancy in the nineteenth century Europe, particularly under the considerable influence of Taine. It is true that he holds that "the work of the poet depends not only on himself and his age, but on the mentality of the nation to which he belongs and the spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic tradition and environment which it creates for him".³ "But this", he also clearly states, "is no essential condition for the birth of great poetry".⁴ For, above all, he would like us always to remember that "the poet. . . . creates out of himself and has the indefeasible right to follow freely the breath of the spirit within him, provided he satisfies in his work the law of poetic beauty".⁵ The fact of the matter is that "the external forms of his age and nation only give him the starting-point and some of his materials and determine to some extent the room he finds for the free play of his poetic spirit".⁶ But on this ground Sri Aurobindo says that he cannot "subscribe to the theory of the man and his milieu or the dogma of the historical school of criticism which asks of us to study all the precedents, circumstances, influences, surroundings, all that created the man and his work, -as if there were not something in him apart from all these which made all the difference, - and supposes that out of this the right estimate of his poetry will arise."⁷

1. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

3. *F. P.*, p. 52.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

In his illuminating essay on Kalidasa, published recently in the book-form, he has some very interesting remarks to make on this historical method of criticism. He says :

"The historical method is certainly an attractive one and it leads to some distinct advantages, for it decidedly aids those who are not gifted with fine insight and literary discrimination, to understand certain sides of a poet's work more clearly and intelligently. But while it increases our knowledge of the workings of the human mind, it does not in the end assist or improve our critical appreciation of poetry; it helps to an understanding of the man and of those aspects of his poetry which concern his personal individuality but it obstructs our clear and accurate appreciation of the work and its value.... The individuality of Shakespeare as expressed in his recorded actions and his relations to his contemporaries is a matter of history and has nothing to do with appreciation of his poetry.... on the contrary, it may often come between me and the genuine revelation of the poet in his work, for actions seldom reveal more than the outer, bodily, and sensational man, while his word takes us within to the mind and the reason, the receiving and selecting part of him which are his true self.... This is the essential defect which vitiates the theory of the man and his milieu."¹

What is more, "not even the right historical or psychological understanding of him (i.e. the poet) need arise out of this method, since we may very easily read into him and his work things which may perhaps have been there before and around him, but never really got into him".² It is then obvious that for all the external brilliance and charm of this method we certainly shall not be able to form the right poetical estimate if we bring in "so much that is accidental and unessential to cloud our free and direct impression".³

It is rather the very opposite of this procedure which, according to Sri Aurobindo, constitutes the method of appreciation. It is "to come straight to the poet and his poems for all we need essentially to know about them".⁴ Here alone we shall get "all that we really want for any true aesthetic or poetic purpose".⁵ After we have done

1. *Mother India*, December, 1952, pp. 29-31.

2. *F. P.*, p. 53.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

this paramount thing we may go elsewhere "for any minor elucidation or else to satisfy our scientific and historical curiosity: things accidental are then more likely to fall into the right place and the freshness of poetic appreciation to remain unobscured".¹

So much for the broad historical, including the general, biographical cum psychological method of literary criticism. What about the method of comparative criticism? He is certainly not opposed to it and has himself given several remarkable examples of this method of criticism, a typical instance being the following where Shakespeare and Goethe are compared :

"Goethe goes much deeper than Shakespeare; he had an incomparably greater intellect than the English poet and sounded problems of life and thought Shakespeare had no means of approaching even. But he was certainly not a greater poet. I do not find myself very ready to admit that he was Shakespeare's equal. He wrote out of a high poetic intelligence but his style and movement nowhere came near the poetic power, the magic, the sovereign expression and profound or subtle rhythms of Shakespeare. Shakespeare was a supreme poet and one might almost say, nothing else; Goethe was by far the greater man and the greater brain, but he was a poet by choice, his mind's choice among its many high and effulgent possibilities, rather than by the very necessity of his being. He wrote his poetry as he did everything else with a great skill and an inspired subtlety of language and effective genius but it was only part of his genius and not the whole. There is, too, a touch mostly wanting the touch of an absolute, an intensely inspired or revealing inevitability...."²

But speaking theoretically, he does not favour much the comparative mode of approach, particularly to the reputed great names in poetry and art. As he said in one of his letters dated 6.10.1934, the attempt at comparison of poets like Blake and Shakespeare or Dante and Shakespeare by critics like Housman and Eliot, "seem to me.... irrelevant and otiose".³ His own feeling on this point is rather different: "Both Dante and Shakespeare", says he, "stand at the summit of poetic fame, but each with so different a way of genius that comparison is unprofitable. Shakespeare has powers

1. Ibid., p. 53.

2. *L3.*, pp. 305-6.

3. Ibid., p. 270.

that Dante cannot rival; Dante has heights which Shakespeare could not reach; but in essence they stand as mighty equals".¹ And as to Housman's comparison between Shakespeare and Blake in his famous essay on *The Name and Nature of Poetry*, Sri Aurobindo remarks, "...that opinion is more a personal fantasy than anything else. Purity and greatness are not the same thing. Blake's may be pure poetry in Housman's sense and Shakespeare's not except in a few passages: But nobody can contend that Blake's genius had the width and volume and richness of Shakespeare's. It can be said that Blake as a mystic poet achieved things beyond Shakespeare's measure—for Shakespeare had not the mystic's vision; but as a poet of the play of life, Shakespeare is everywhere and Blake nowhere. These are tricks of language and idiosyncrasies of preference. One has to put each thing in its place without confusing issues and then one can see that Housman's praise of Blake may be justified but any exaltation of him by comparison with Shakespeare is not in accordance with the abiding intuition of these things which remain undisturbed by any individual verdict".²

Similarly, the habit of ranking or classifying poets and artists which, too, seems to appeal to quite a number of us, particularly those who are of a rather journalistic temperament, has, according to Sri Aurobindo, a value only when it enables us in all seriousness, "to put each thing in its place without confusing issues". Of course, he can indulge in it himself at moments with remarkable finesse and clarity, if pressed for it, as is evident from the following letter, but on the whole, he would not like a critic to make this method a habit or a fetish:

"I suppose all the names you mentioned can be included among the world's supreme singers; or if you like, you can put them all in three rows, e.g.:

First row—Homer, Shakespeare, Valmiki.

Second row—Dante, Kalidasa, Aeschylus, Virgil, Milton.

Third row—Goethe.

And there you are! To speak less flippantly, the first three have at once supreme imaginative originality, supreme poetic gift, widest scope and supreme creative genius. Each is a sort of poetic demiurge who has created a world of his own. Dante's triple world beyond is more

1. Ibid., pp. 270-71.

2. Ibid., p. 271.

constructed by the poetic seeing mind than by this kind of elemental demiurgic power—otherwise, he would rank by their side; the same with Kalidasa. Aeschylus is a seer and creator but on a much smaller scale. Virgil and Milton have a less spontaneous breath of creative genius; one or two typical figures excepted, they live rather by what they have said than by what they have made.”¹

In continuation of this letter to which some objection was presumably made by the correspondent, Sri Aurobindo wrote back, conceding that “Vyasa could very well claim a place beside Valmiki, Sophocles beside Aeschylus”.² But as to the rest of the great names such as Lucretius, Euripides, Calderon, Corneille, Hugo for whom the correspondent concerned had presumably pleaded, he was not prepared to place them any higher than “the third row”, and even then he could not help saying that it was “something of a promotion” about which one could legitimately “feel some qualms”.

And as to the great Romantic poets for whom he said he had a personal temperamental preference, he could not help saying when the said question of ranking with the greatest poetic masters of the world arose that Shelley, Keats and Wordsworth could not be brought into consideration although their best work was “as fine poetry as any written”. But since they had “written nothing on a larger scale”, he could not place them “among the greatest creators”. Of course, “if Keats had finished *Hyperion* (without spoiling it), if Shelley had lived, or if Wordsworth had not “petered out like a motor car with insufficient petrol”,³ it might have been different, “but we have to take things as they are”. No doubt, “all began magnificently, but none of them finished, and what work they did, except a few lyrics, sonnets, short pieces and narratives, is often flawed and unequal”.⁴ And so he concluded with remarkable good sense and sovereign impartiality, “If they had to be admitted, what about at least fifty others in Europe and Asia ?”⁵

Indeed, until one has reached a fairly high level of intuitive critical judgment, maturity of outlook and

1. Ibid., p. 302.

2. Ibid., p. 303.

3. Ibid., p. 303.

4. Ibid., p. 303.

5. Ibid., p. 303.

sense of detachment, it is rather difficult to practise in all seriousness the comparative, including the ranking, method of criticism, otherwise, in place of good honest criticism we are likely to get but a reckless and fantastic growth of personal temperamental fads and crotchets.

To sum up, then, his theoretical standpoint on the art of criticism, we may say that Sri Aurobindo is for that kind of appreciation which leads us straight to as well as into the poem or the poet and his works, which is "at once discerning and suggestive.... (and) forces us both to see and think",¹ and if one can marshal for this purpose the essence of the methods of analytical and comparative, biographical, historical and psychological criticism, these may not be kept quite out of bounds provided these do not obscure or pervert the freshness of the direct first-hand poetic appreciation, or confuse the basic issues involved. To achieve this aim with success, the critic concerned will no doubt need such qualities as a "living force of style", a "delicacy of touch", a "fineness and depth of observation and insight", a "just sympathy and appreciation".² But above all,—and it is here that Sri Aurobindo is so different from the large majority of present-day English and American critics,—it is not by means of the intellectual mode of observation, analysis, interpretation and judgment, which for all its cleverness and even brilliance will keep him confined mostly to the externals and outward forms and features of the object of appreciation, that he has either to make use of these qualities or to proceed on his own distinctive method and style of criticism. On the contrary, Sri Aurobindo would have him awaken in himself, without fail, like the creative artist, "a certain vision, an insight and intuitive response in the soul" so that it is really by the faculty of his soul or his "intuitive critical vision" and not of his reasoning intellect or dynamic, vital senses or some kind of an intellectual, psychological imagination alone that he has to appreciate and evaluate poetry and art, poems and poets. These faculties, no doubt, can be some of his powerful aids provided he knows how to submit them to the subtle, intuitive guidance of the infallible judgment of his soul and make them the latter's instruments of organisation and expression. But if these subordinate faculties or powers themselves are raised to

1. *F. P.*, p. 1.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

the position of sole judges to the utter neglect of, or indifference to, the subtle and sure working of the intuitive spiritual critical vision, the result can be but a welter of conflicting critical opinions and schools, such as we find today, instead of the growth of true, constructive, helpful and enduring pieces of evaluation and criticism, or the right kind of "the common pursuit" of judgment, by which alone both the readers in general and practising artists and critics themselves can really profit.

■ ■ ■

Chapter 14

CONCLUSION

Though today, considering ourselves as more intelligent and less didactic-minded than the readers of *Hitopadesh* or Aesop's Fables, we do not ask ourselves at the end of a story: 'What is the moral of it?', yet I, for one, would choose to be an old-fashioned reader of my own writing here. Now that as a writer of this rather abstruse though—let me hope not dry or dull subject, I have reached my rather long journey's end, I would naturally like to ask myself, as its reader: What is the upshot of it all?

This means that I should, first of all, say a few words about the utility of literary criticism itself. Of course, quite a number of distinguished critics, of both the present and the past, have done so in a distinguished manner and I do not think that I can add anything new or significant to what they have already said. Yet in so far as a literary critic, I am afraid, barring a few exceptions, has not yet become so self-conscious about his own particular kind of profession as to think of it as something independent and valuable in itself, or, at least as valuable, though not as independent, as the profession of creative writing, I believe, there is still scope as well as necessity for making some personal observation, on howsoever small and modest a scale, upon that human activity which goes by the name of literary criticism. Moreover, a little general reflection of this kind is quite relevant to my present subject, for, when Sri Aurobindo embarked upon that critical venture, in the pages of his philosophical-cultural monthly, *The Arya*, of outlining the essential nature and properties of the poetic art in general, and the poetry of the future in particular, with specific reference to English poets, he was not indulging in any literary pastime, however elevated, or simply applying his richly and diversely gathered spiritual knowledge and vision to literary activity. On the contrary, he undertook this specific labour with all the self-consciousness of a man in earnest, seriously engaged in a work which he considered to be of paramount importance in so far as it was closely related to the cultural evolution of man. It is evident, therefore, that he would

not have taken up a work of this kind if he had not been already convinced of the necessity and purposefulness of the activity of literary criticism in human life itself. Nor would he have toiled almost incessantly for quite a number of years, keeping himself awake for practically the whole night, replying to the queries of his literary-minded disciples, among others, which eventually resulted in such significant literary-critical volumes of letters as *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Third Series, *Letters on "Savitri"*, and *Life, Literature, Yoga*.

I do not think, therefore, that it requires any detailed explanation to prove that Sri Aurobindo was as serious-minded and earnest a literary critic as, say, Aristotle and Coleridge were before, or Dr. I. A. Richards and Dr. F. R. Leavis, for example, are today. Like these European critics he appears to have taken the activity of literary criticism with all that sense of intellectual self-awareness as well as moral integrity and responsibility which marks off a genuine creative artist from a dilettante. What is more, though it is true that he did not theorise much about the art of literary criticism itself, at any rate, not in the manner and on the scale of an Eliot or a Leavis or a Richards or a Crane or a Brooks today, yet when we collect together his observations on this particular subject, comparatively meagre and scattered as they are, we feel justified in claiming that in his hands this specific, one may even say, specialised branch of literary activity, usually considered to be parasitic and journalistic in nature and vicarious in purpose, turned out to be an integral part of human life itself and its cultural, spiritual growth. This was also made a means of self-realisation and self-awareness like poetry and art or religion and philosophy. It, too, could serve as a fit medium for achieving that inner growth of consciousness which is the key to true knowledge or enlightenment. Hence the spiritual earnestness, — one may almost call it a spiritual zeal — with which he expressed himself on the importance of the poetic act and art and its immense responsibilities and possibilities in the future in stepping up the spiritual evolution of modern man and modern consciousness. Hence all the pains taken with exemplary patience and tolerance, over the queries of his literary disciples and the desire to give his correspondents as precise and constructive and luminous an exposition of the literary and aesthetic points raised, as was divinely possible on the human level.

Was it Disraeli who said, "You know who the critics are—the men who have failed in literature and art" ? Of course, Disraeli was no great man of letters, whose opinions would matter to us ordinarily. But such a view as this certainly reflects a misconception which is common enough. No wonder if even such a serious-minded literary critic as F. L. Lucas calls criticism "a charming parasite". Even T. S. Eliot thinks that a second-rate mind can perform the work of criticism satisfactorily.

It is not the literary critic but the creative artist of words, whether in prose or poetry, who is generally supposed to be a person endowed with almost supernatural, divine powers. His soul is taken to be as a star which dwells apart and on an infinitely higher plane than ours. A poet, for example, has been declared to be an unacknowledged legislator of the world.

Not that the praise thus lavished upon the creative artist is unjust or undeserved. But, unfortunately, this has hitherto resulted in the unjust neglect of the role of the literary critic. He is not supposed to come trailing clouds of glory like the artist. On the contrary, he toils far behind, struggling in the wake of the artist, endeavouring to catch up with him, to understand, interpret and evaluate him. The critic is thus taken to be an altogether inferior person who can but shine in the reflected glory of the artist. Such is the popular conception. And to a fairly large extent, one cannot help saying, the critic is himself responsible for such an unjust treatment. As my distinguished Professor once wrote in an article :

"To know the artist has always been his great desire and it never occurred to him to seek to know himself. He neglected himself, his proper function and the importance of that function. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that others also neglected him, misunderstood his function and minimised his importance."¹

However, the situation today is changing and it is now recognised that no creative work is likely to be successful without either the conscious or sub-conscious—and one may also add, overconscious—use of criticism. As Herbert Read so pertinently says : "We must all realise by now that no good artist exists who is not, at every

1. K. Ahmad : "The Meaning of Criticism", *Current Studies*, No. 1 May 1953, Patna College, P. 14.

point of his career, first, a good critic. The work of art emerges within a field of critical perceptions.”¹ Eliot also reminds us that “some creative writers are superior to others solely because their critical faculty is superior. . . . we are aware, too, that the critical discrimination which comes so hardly to us has in more fortunate men flashed in the very heat of creation; and we do not assume that because works have been composed without apparent critical labour, no critical labour has been done. We do not know what previous labours have prepared, or what goes on, in the way of criticism, all the time in the mind of the creators”.²

The importance and value of literary criticism are, therefore, being increasingly recognised today and it is as it should be. Eliot says that criticism is “as inevitable as breathing”. The wonder is that it should have taken a critic so many centuries to recognise and declare this obvious truth. Even so, it is doubtful whether the full implication of such a statement has been properly recognised even by the critics themselves. Indeed, it is high time we felt that criticism is as natural and precious a gift as the gift of sight or the gift of speech. It is perhaps more precious than either. Nay, life itself is impossible without criticism. I may be taken to be exaggerating its importance. But a little reflection will convince us that it is really so and just as we die the moment we cease to breathe, so we cannot get on well in life if we cease to understand, evaluate and judge. Every moment of our life we are making critical judgments. We are constantly questioning, examining, testing, accepting and rejecting things.

Now, literary criticism is just a specialised mode of this very fundamental and natural human activity which never ceases, to all intents and purposes. Only here we apply our critical faculties to problems and works of literature. What is more, we cannot create literature unless we are also literary critics in this fundamental sense, in a greater or less degree.

However, in a specific sense literary criticism is about something other than itself—call it art, literature, poetry. It has, broadly speaking, as Eliot puts it, two theoretical limits: “at one of which we attempt to answer the question ‘what is poetry?’ and at the other, ‘is this a good

1. *Collected Essays in Literary Criticism*, op. cit., p. 127.

2. *Selected Essays*, op. cit. p. 30.

poem ?”¹ Unfortunately, the bulk of extant critical literature is mainly concerned with answering the second question, with determining the value of particular works of art. But the first question has not been successfully tackled yet. It is not a matter of mere definition. Most of us may agree with Eliot that a definition of poetry, even if found suitable and satisfactory enough would not be of much use to us. But the fact is that a question like “What is poetry ?” does not involve so much the question of definition of poetry as such broad and big theoretical questions of paramount importance as what is the fundamental nature or essence of poetry ? What are its first and last aims ? What is its use to man, and society ? etc. Nor are these merely academic questions but vital to our life as well as civilisation. And we must answer them to our satisfaction if we are to make poetry as well as literary criticism vital and indispensable aspects of our own growth and well-being.

Unfortunately it is generally assumed that we know these things, and working on this assumption most of the critics today have concerned themselves chiefly with the work of assessing actual poetry. This comparative neglect of the essential theoretical aspect of criticism has resulted in almost a severance of life and literature, of life and literary criticism. Our ignorance of the intimate relation between life and literature is really responsible for the popular conception of literature as something of a luxury and not as our daily bread which it really is. And it is this conception which in its turn is responsible for the popular attitude towards literary criticism which looks upon it as an isolated and not very useful or necessary activity. To the average man, literary criticism seems to be a rather fruitless activity in which a few fatuous persons engage themselves because they have neither the desire nor the capacity for other and more useful activities. Most literary critics, too, have by their action helped in fostering such a misconception. As a rule, literary criticism is conducted in an academic atmosphere, far removed from what is regarded as the realities or crudities of life and it tends to end in abstract generalities. And when it is not merely abstract, when it pays attention to details and becomes concrete, it degenerates into a mere verbal analysis, a kind of technical game which provides the critic with an opportunity of showing off

1. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, op. cit., p. 16.

his mental and verbal ingenuity. I believe both the types of criticism are equally barren, because in either case there is a separation between the literary and other activities and interests of life.

Indeed, it is high time it were realised that literary criticism is neither such an abstract thing that it shall be altogether isolated from life and conducted in an exclusively academic atmosphere, nor a field for the exercise of the critical intellectual ingenuity. It involves something more than a merely 'aesthetic' valuation of literature. As Herbert Read rightly points out, referring to literary criticism:

"This science—if it is permissible to call it a science—really covers a very wide field indeed. It is the valuation, by some standard, of the worth of literature. You may say that the standard is always a very definitely aesthetic one, but I find it impossible to define aesthetics without bringing in questions of value which are, when you have seen all their implications, social or ethical in nature. There is no danger, therefore, (or very little danger) in the direction of a too inclusive conception of the critic's function: danger, and death, is rather to be found in the narrow drift of technical research, the analysis of the *means* of expression and so on."¹

Literary criticism, then, should not be merely a technical affair; it should not merely confine itself to an analysis of the means of expression. As Dr. Leavis reminds us:

"Literary criticism.... is concerned with more than literature.... A serious interest in literature cannot be merely literary, it is likely to derive from, a perception of—which must be a preoccupation with—the problem of social equity and order and of cultural health. It is the modern disintegration that makes it urgent in our day to get a real literary criticism decisively functioning."²

There is, no doubt, that a literary critic is a specialist and like any other specialist he has his own particular field as well as mode of investigation. But then the very nature of his investigation makes it incumbent upon him to trespass into other fields of human endeavour. A concern for the health of literature implies a concern for human culture itself; a criticism of literature can be

1. *Collected Essays*, op. cit., p. 125.

2. *Determinations*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1934, p. 2.

valuable only when it implies and involves a criticism of the complex of social and psychological forces that influence a work of art and are in their turn modified by it. Without such a large, extra-literary perception the judgment can be only of a limited and partial value. To turn one's back upon, say, philosophy or psychology or sociology is to limit the influence of literary criticism. This certainly does not mean that a literary critic is asked to be a philosopher or a psychologist or a sociologist. No, his interest in literature should be predominantly literary and he should evaluate and judge a work of literature or a literary problem as literature above anything else. But this cannot be the limit of his activity, for the discussion of the value of a work of art may involve discussions of a philosophical, theological, moral or sociological character. It may necessitate an examination of an economic theory or a political doctrine. Those who consider literature to be a thing apart, having no contact with other human activities, those whose interest in literature is purely literary and technical would not be able to bring about that integration between life and literature which is the need of the hour. Nor would they be able to develop necessary equipment of a literary critic which, among other things, consists of an awareness of the best that is thought and investigated in the different branches of human knowledge. It is not that the literary critic is called upon to master all the various accumulated knowledge. But some familiarity with the best that is thought in at least the important departments of knowledge, the most fresh and invigorating ideas of other branches of knowledge is certainly necessary. That is to say, he has got to be something of a polymath.

And it is precisely here that the importance of a literary critic like Sri Aurobindo becomes manifest to us. The immense variety and depth of his knowledge, his luminous perceptions, the acute discernment of his mind but above all, his intuitive critical vision and a profoundly well-integrated spiritual consciousness, wisdom and attainment were some of the gifts which he could usefully employ with a sovereign ease and mastery on the general problems of literature and poetry no less than on actual poems and thereby make of the art of literary criticism as fully creative a literary activity as poetry itself and as good a means of illuminating and uplifting human consciousness as any of his other literary or non-literary creative works. He seems to have not only known "the

best that is known and thought in the world", and thereby created "a current of true and fresh ideas", as Arnold so passionately and eloquently wanted his ideal critic to do, but achieved a perfect fusion between creation and criticism which alone can be the *ne plus ultra* of a true man of letters. This is the reason why we find it difficult to describe *The Future Poetry* or his luminous letters about the overhead aesthesis or general sources of poetic inspiration and vision or the process, form and substance of poetry or even his critical evaluation of Goethe and Shakespeare, Yeats and A. E., Shaw and Lawrence as works of literary criticism in the sheer technical sense of the term. They are pure literary criticism, if by it we mean an art which in substance, form and expression is as organic and beautiful and joyous and suggestive a creation as a good, growing and enduring poem, say by Shakespeare, Kalidasa or Sri Aurobindo himself. There is ever at the core of all his writings a creative ecstacy and luminosity which can never fail to produce a kind of hypnotic charm upon his readers. And yet the charm of writing is always firmly and serenely controlled and architecturally constructed so that we find the nail hit right on its head, as it were, and the subject of his criticism secured in our memory. We may disagree with him later on; we may question his hypothesis and assumption; we may find him seated on an altogether higher plane of observation than it is possible for us to reach, and we may feel his power of insight too fine and subtle for us to hold for long. But for the time being, at least, we cannot help feeling that he has lapped the subject of his discussion round and caught it firmly and transparently within his luminous grasp. And one of the secrets of his success lies exactly in that supreme quality of the literary critic, which Arnold so felicitously summed up in the single word—"disinterestedness" and himself explained it as the quality of "keeping aloof from what is called "the practical view of things""; by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches."¹ The only point of difference with regard to Sri Aurobindo is that instead of the "free play of the mind", by which one would usually understand the active, reasoning, rational, critical, logical mind

1. "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time", reproduced in *The Major Critics*, op. cit., p. 246.

specially in relation to such an intellectual thing as literary criticism is commonly taken to be, it is the serenely contemplative, meditative play of some 'silent' mind or the large, luminous, cosmic gaze of what he called the 'Overmind', or best still, it is the free, joyous, disinterested but sure play of the spiritual, supramental vision, which he would like to apply to all subjects. This is the distinctive mark of Sri Aurobindo as a literary critic. This explains why he is so widely synthetic in his approach and compass. It is this quality which makes *The Future Poetry* so suggestively inclusive of the past, present and future, of the literary genius of the East and that of the West, of the ancient Vedantic-mantric poetic tradition and the modernist "free verse" European experiment, of spirituality and scholarship, inspiration and conscious technical labour, intuitive vision of the future and pragmatic efforts and difficulties of the present. The book is not merely a study of the poetic principles and possibilities, pure and simple, or of some supreme aesthetics in the abstract but a dynamic effort to explore the next evolutionary step and rise of modern humanity through the rationale of the poetic word and rhythm. It has a subtle and deep bearing on our life and culture. In a profounder sense than Dr. F. R. Leavis had probably in mind when he stated in his *Determinations* the true function of literary criticism, this book of Sri Aurobindo is a serious enough preoccupation with something more vital and urgent and important than "the problem of social equity and order and of cultural health". It has an insistent message for the whole soul of modern man, his inner as well as outer aesthetic being, and, if properly received, can go a long way in transforming his present-day mentality and his hitherto-evolved instruments of living and action so as to enable him to prove worthy of, and be an active participant in, the new spiritual age which, according to him, is now in the offing. It is both a testament and a fulfilment. In these critical times when our creative as well as critical mind is torn between conflicting and contradictory theories, ideologies, aims and practices, it comes to us as a sound, uplifting marvel of a unified and unifying vision and purpose. A book of synthetic critical wisdom, it offers both the creative and critical writers of today, in the East as much as in the West, the new light which is steady and potent enough to inspire with the certitude of achieving such literary glories as

might even dim the achievements of the past and the present.

But probably I have been carried away too far and as it happened with Keats on his first looking into Chapman's Homer, I seem to have fallen into the lyrical ecstasies of a new discovery; and have perhaps begun to make fantastic claims for this book.

But ecstasies apart, I believe even a reader with reservations would find the book a remarkable and original piece of writing and not fail to be struck by the versatile scholarship, power of large generalisations and the sudden subtleties of thought and vision with which Sri Aurobindo frequently surprises his readers. This in itself is an achievement which is all the more remarkable when we remember that except for a few passages of the book he could not even revise it properly and fill in the few gaps and bring it up-to-date as he had a mind to before letting the series of articles appear in book-form during his lifetime. This is probably why the book was published posthumously. As regards certain obvious omissions such as those of the Metaphysical poets or the Georgian and Imagist poets of recent times, for example, it is obvious that these could not have been a sign of defect or oversight. When the names of some poets were suggested to him, he justifiably answered in a letter: "I did not deal with all these poets because it was not in the scope of my idea to review the whole literature, but to follow the main lines."¹ But the principal difficulty under which he laboured was, as he put it in the same letter: "At the time I had no books and could only write from memory."² Considering this handicap, one is really surprised, as the Editor of *Mother India* said, at the accuracy and aptness achieved.

Another obvious merit of the book, as already suggested in my third chapter, lies in the fact that Sri Aurobindo breaks here fresh ground by discovering *loci critici* from our ancient Vedic texts, analogous or parallel to, say, the Aristotelian poetics. Starting from opposite ends it is both exciting and instructive to realise how the two schools meet largely enough on common ground. Then again his idea of poetry as "the *mantra* of the Real" will be found by Western readers to be unexpectedly reinforced by the modern view as crystallised by poetic

1. *Mother India*, February, 1952, p. 44.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

critics from T.E. Hulme to T.S. Eliot that "poetry should be felt before it is understood", and that it is the "pursuit of the ultimate, enduring Reality". And as another modern Greek poet Demetrius Capetanakis has said: "It is the infinite depth of the unknown, called by the religious people God, which gives depth to poetry." And if Eliot is the authoritative critic we recognise today, even he has stressed more than once the "incantatory" value of poetry as its basic desideratum. The high claims which Sri Aurobindo has thus made for poetry are, in a way, shared by modern distinguished poets and critics, though being largely intellectualists, the latter may not be yet fully prepared to accept the spiritual implications of this recognition.

As regards Sri Aurobindo's faith in inspiration and his critical belief that where there is no inspiration there can be no poetry, it may be quite well for the sharp-edged physical intelligence of an Eliot almost to dismiss the theory of inspiration in some such manner:

"That there is an analogy between mystical experience and some of the ways in which poetry is written I do not deny; . . . though . . . whether the analogy is of significance for the student of religion, or only to the psychologist, I do not know. I know, for instance, that some forms of ill-health, debility or anaemia, may (if other circumstances are favourable) produce an efflux of poetry in a way approaching the condition of automatic writing—though, in contrast to the claims sometimes made for the latter, the material has obviously been incubating within the poet, and cannot be suspected of being a present from a friend or impertinent demon To me it seems that at these moments, which are characterised by sudden lifting of the burden of anxiety and fear which presses upon our daily life so steadily that we are unaware of it; what happens is something *negative*; that is to say, not 'inspiration, as we commonly think of it, but the breaking down of strong habitual barriers—which tend to re-form very quickly.'"¹

No doubt, T.S. Eliot is wise enough to recognise that this kind of "negative" experience is not "responsible for the creation of all the most profound poetry written, or even always of the best of a single poet's work".² Nor is he oblivious of the fact that "some finer minds . . . may operate very differently; I cannot think of Shakespeare

1. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, op. cit., p. 144.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

or Dante as having been dependent upon such capricious releases".¹ Nevertheless, he is not prepared to accept either the supremacy of the inspirational power or its capacity to bring about a distinctive value to the poetry written under its influence, for he further says: "The way in which poetry is written is not, so far as our knowledge of these obscure matters as yet extends, any clue to its value. . . . (and) organisation is necessary as well as 'inspiration'."²

Critics like I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, William Empson, L. C. Knights etc. all of whom have concerned themselves with commendable seriousness, intelligence and insight with the poetic activity of man and brought a number of new disciplines to bear upon the poetic art and the evaluation of actual poetry are also, I am afraid, critical of this belief in inspiration. Indeed, one who would take up an objective, rational and the usual scientific approach to poetry and art can hardly have any interest or belief in such a thing as inspiration. The classicist and as critics they are really all classicists, though in different ways and degrees—refuses to see in the highest works of art anything but the exercise of judgment, sensibility and skill. But the knowledge of psycho-analysis has, in recent times, thrown fresh light upon the subject of inspiration. True, the Western knowledge has not yet reached a stage when it can be said that it is valid enough to explain the origin and process of all art. In my chapter on the planes of poetic inspiration I believe sufficient indication has been given to expose the limitations of the Freudian and Jungian psycho-analytical explanations of the poetic creation, particularly of the highest kind, for until the psychologists come to recognise the planes of the Superconscious, just as they have discovered the mysterious regions of the Unconscious and the Subconscious, it will not be possible for them to evolve a complete technique of inspiration, such as Herbert Read thinks it will be, one day.³ Nevertheless, it is a significant sign of the times that such a science as psycho-analysis with all the importance and prestige it has already come to acquire all over the world, should put so much credence upon the doctrine of inspiration

1. Ibid., p. 146.

2. Ibid., p. 146.

3. "I think that in time a complete technique of inspiration may be evolved".—Herbert Read, *Collected Essays*, op. cit., p. 138.

and not dismiss it as a superstition of the past, or a figment of one's imagination. It is, therefore, gratifying to find Herbert Read declaring with a sense of unquestioning certitude: "Art has only one origin—inspiration."¹ And more recently he has no less unambiguously stated:

"The nearer we get to that central mystery of art the more obvious it becomes, as Jung has often remarked, that there is nothing personal about it. The artist is merely a medium, a channel for forces that are impersonal, and though there can be no great art without enabling instruments of sensibility and talent, it is the power and purpose with which those instruments are used that make the difference between the major work of art and these trivial but charming expressions of sentiment which are not merely minor in degree, but also essentially different in kind. The fact that the very gifts that enable major works of art to be created are often used by the same artist for minor effects, or as aesthetic exercises, should not blind us to the radical difference which nevertheless exists between the songs and lyrics of Shakespeare or Goethe, and works like *Lear* and *Faust*."²

So, after all, such an impersonal force as inspiration does exist; and its presence does make a significant difference to the quality and value of a work of art. Well, as far as Sri Aurobindo is concerned, we have already seen with what a convincing reality of his personal experience and almost a scientific minuteness and precision of categorical knowledge he has given us an outline of the various sources as well as planes of inspiration and the specific qualities attending upon each one of those levels. And so far as his luminous description of the planes of overhead inspiration is concerned, it is something entirely new in the domains of psychology and aesthetics. Thus Herbert Read's hope about the forging of a complete technique of inspiration seems well on its way to fulfilment. But it is to be distinctly noted that it is not through the experiments and researches of the science of psycho-analysis that the thing is to be realised. On the contrary, one needs for this the help of the science of Indian Yoga, particularly the knowledge and discipline of what Sri Aurobindo calls the integral Yoga.

What is more, it is not just in a theoretical manner that Sri Aurobindo has revealed to us all these planes

1. *Collected Essays*, op. cit., p. 127.

2. *The Forms of Things Unknown*, Faber and Faber, MCMLX, p. 61.

of inspiration. He has also applied this knowledge to specific verses, tracing them to the particular source from which they have come. Some instances will prove this point. Vaughan's line : "I saw them walking in an air of glory" is declared by him to be a mixture of "something of the Illumined Mind, something of the Poetic Intelligence diluting the full sovereignty of the higher expression".¹ The following verses taken from Keats's *Endymion* :

Solitary thinkings such as dodge
Conception to the very bourne of heaven,
Then leave the naked brain

strike him as a combination of the Higher Mind and the Illumined Mind.²

The following famous verses of Vaughan again :

I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,
All calm as it was bright

are taken to be a mixture of the "Illumined Mind with something from Overmind".³

On being asked by K. D. Sethna to indicate the sources of some of his own verses (i.e. Mr. Sethna's), he wrote as follows :⁴

"The mute unshadowed spaces of her mind"
—Intuitive with Overmind touch.

* * *

'What visionary urge
Has stolen from horizons watched alone
Into thy being with ethereal guile ?'

—Second line Intuitive with Overmind touch. Third line
imaginative Poetic Intelligence.

* * *

'Here life's lost heart of splendour beats immense.'
—Illumined Mind with mental Overmind touch.

* * *

'An ocean-hearted ecstasy am I
Where time flows inward to eternal shores.'

—Intuitive, Illumined, Overmind touch all mixed together.

But it needs a Sri Aurobindo to make all these

1. *L. L. T.*, p. 35.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

distinctions and even he could not be always exhaustive. It is evident that it is necessary to be much advanced in spiritual consciousness and disciplines of the kind Sri Aurobindo had mastered in order to be sure of the sources from which a line of poetry came. Nevertheless, Sri Aurobindo has shown the literary critics of today, particularly of the psycho-analytical and transcendental mind, how to tap the various levels of inspiration. In any case, his literary criticism, both theoretical and practical, is an ample demonstration of the fact that it is not so much by one's intellectual faculties alone as the subtle intuitive ones, the spiritual powers of apprehension, in fact, that the work of critical appreciation and evaluation can be best done. The ideal thing, of course, would be to achieve a fusion of the two. In a felicitous passage he divides the activity of human thought broadly into "two groups of functions, those of the right hand, contemplation, creation, imagination, the centres that see the truth, and those of the left hand, criticism, reasoning, discrimination, inquiry, the centres that judge the truth when it is seen".¹ Now it is when a literary critic is able to have a mastery over both these functions of the right hand and the left hand, of human thought that his work of evaluation will be most satisfactory and of an abiding value.² Above all, it is something of a real *cittasuddhi*, the purification of the heart, the *Katharsis* of Aristotle, which is needed on the part of a literary critic. It is the inner purification which will best enable him to cultivate and use, in the truest sense of the terms, all those qualities of sobriety, detachment, disinterestedness, discrimination, judgment upon which a classical critic lays so much stress.

Also, as we have seen in our last chapter, his approach to the art of literary criticism is as intuitive and spiritual as it is to the art of poetic creation itself. It is not necessary, therefore, according to him, that the ideal critic should be something of an intellectual giant and depend entirely upon his reasoning, rational faculties for appreciation of poetry and literature. It is by some inner intuitive power of discrimination and not by an intellectual process of ratiocination and analysis, howsoever

1. *The National Value of Art*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1953, p. 16.

2. T.S. Eliot also hints at, more or less, the same truth when he says: "The critical activity finds its highest, its true fulfilment in a kind of union with creation in the labour of the artist."—*Selected Essays*, op. cit., p. 31.

brilliant and acute on the surface, that he can best seize the inner secret truth or structure and rhythm and symbolism of a poem. And he would like to tell us that it is not until the soul or the secret inner law of beauty and harmony of a poem is well within one's grasp that a truer, fuller and deeper understanding of its merits and demerits or of the poetic art itself is possible. This is something more than what the usual subjective, romantic imagination can do. The subjective romantic imagination is no doubt an inward faculty and also a spontaneous intuitive activity. But unless it has been properly disciplined and intuitivised by the soul-power in us, it remains, after all, a thing of the mind, a mental faculty itself, though different, no doubt, from the reasoning logical mental faculty. Also, it is open to the danger of all kinds of impressionism. Therefore, unless this faculty of the romantic imagination is something of the kind which Blake, for example, took it to be when he said, "One Power alone makes a Poet: Imagination, the Divine Vision."¹ it is an offshoot of the mental power itself and bound to the limitations of this power and, therefore, cannot enable the literary critic concerned to see the inner essential truth or subtle structure and form of the poem under examination. It is a psychicised or spiritualised romantic imagination, an imagination which has the power to turn into "the divine vision" that is needed here; and it is this kind of imaginative contemplative faculty which Sri Aurobindo would like the literary critic to possess.

It is clear, therefore, that if we feel tempted to call Sri Aurobindo a neo-Classicist or a neo-Romanticist, both of which labels can be equally well applied to him, we should be discriminative enough to perceive that he is not the kind of neo-Classicist that T. S. Eliot, for example, is or the kind of neo-Romantic that A.C. Bradley or Wilson Knight, for example, is. Nor does he quite belong to the class of such transcendentalist Romantic critics as Herbert Read and Middleton Murry, for whereas Herbert Read's transcendental romanticism operates too much under the influence of the science of psycho-analysis of the Freudian and Jungian types, and Middleton Murry's under that of the religion of Christianity, Sri Aurobindo's romanticism has no such limiting fetters

1. Annotations to Wordsworth's Poems in *Poetry and Prose*, p. 821; also quoted in C. M. Bowra's *The Romantic Imagination*, Oxford Paperbacks, 1961, p. 14.

to bind the soar of its flight into the infinite empyrean heights above or the penetration of its dive into the subtle depths of the human psyche below. His is, if we must have a name and a label for it, spiritual romanticism, and the term 'spiritual' is to be taken in that wide sense in which, as we have already seen, he himself understood and interpreted it.

The upshot of it is, therefore, but this that it is a kind of integral aesthetics which Sri Aurobindo has given to English literature as a literary critic. It is built upon a large principle of synthesis. It seeks to reconcile the hitherto conflicting and opposed movements of romanticism and classicism, realism and idealism, reason and intuition, inspiration and conscious critical labour etc. on the higher plane of the spirit. He may be, therefore, said to forge an almost new, though not entirely untraditional, synthetic critical vision of the soul for the purpose of sound and true, subtle and profound critical evaluation and judgment. Also, as a result of it, Sri Aurobindo has introduced a new discipline into the field of literary criticism. It is, in a large sense, the discipline of the Integral Yoga, as propounded by him, particularly in his books on Yoga.¹ We have seen how in the field of modern English literary criticism the new disciplines of psychology, anthropology, sociology, Marxism, semantics, etc. have been operating in various forms and ways. The older disciplines of biographical, historical and philosophical scholarship are also in action, though sufficiently modified under the influence of these new disciplines. All these have, no doubt, brought about during these forty years or so, as Eliot said, "a brilliant period in literary criticism in both England and America".² And once these new disciplines of the social, mental and linguistic sciences have been introduced into literary criticism, the critics of today and tomorrow can ignore them at their own risk. But then this "brilliant period" as Eliot himself thought it right to caution us, threatens to prove now "too brilliant".³ And what is still more dangerous is that the whole situation may turn out to be alarmingly confusing. Eliot himself

1. Now these books have been collected together in a series of three volumes entitled *On Yoga*, Vols, I, II and III by Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry.

2. "The Frontiers of Criticism", *The Sewanee Review*, Autumn 1956, p. 543.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 543.

could foresee it early enough. In the very introductory lecture delivered at Harvard University during the winter of 1932-33 he clearly stated :

“The psychological and the sociological are probably the two best advertised varieties of modern criticism; but the number of ways in which the problems of criticism are approached was never before so great or so confusing. Never were there fewer settled assumptions as to what poetry is, or why it comes about, or what it is for. Criticism seems to have separated into several diverse kinds.”¹

Indeed, so alarmingly great is the present diversity of the critical schools and disciplines that Eliot had to admit recently that the “very richness and variety” of modern criticism “have perhaps obscured its ultimate purpose”.² “Every critic”, he continues to say, “may have his eye on a definite goal, may be engaged on a task which needs no justification, and yet criticism itself may be lost as to its aims”.*

Naturally, in a situation like this, we need to turn to some discipline which can provide us with a unified, synthetic view of both the basic literary problems and the proper and sympathetic ways of evaluating actual literary works. By introducing the ancient Indian discipline of integral Yoga in the new modern form, suited to the present-day evolution of humanity and eminently fitted to bring about the realisation of its higher possibilities and destinies in the years to come, Sri Aurobindo has, thus, given not only a new but sound and sensible synthetic orientation to the whole of literary and artistic activity. Under the influence of this discipline, “the ultimate purpose” and “aims” of literary criticism itself no less than those of literature, poetry and art in general, for which the eager eyes of T. S. Eliot seek in vain in the confusing and separating welter of the “several diverse kinds” of modern English and American criticism, begin to be appealingly and convincingly clear. These begin to be clear because the critic who allows himself to be properly and fully disciplined by this Yogic science and knowledge and wisdom and experience—such, for example, as Sri Aurobindo did—is “not merely a technical expert, who has learned the rules to be observed by the

1. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, op. cit., p. 27.

2. “The Frontiers of Criticism”, op. cit., p. 528.

* *Ibid.*, p. 528.

writers he criticises"¹ but "the whole man, a man with convictions and principles, and of knowledge and experience of life".² Indeed, it is no ordinary "wholeness" which the "integral" critic of the Aurobindonian conception is likely to develop within himself but a "harmonious and luminous totality" of his being in tune with "the whole field of existence.... God and Nature and man and all the worlds, the field of the finite and the infinite". At any rate, both as a creative artist and a literary critic Sri Aurobindo aspired to be, and to act as, such a "whole man". Both in theory and actual practice his is an example which, whether considered unique or not, has opened out paths for literary critics as well as poets, which are undoubtedly full of rich promise and untold possibilities.

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1. "The Frontiers of Criticism", *op. cit.*, p. 542.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 542.

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